

A PROCESS THEOLOGY OF PRAYER

by

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ABSTRACT

Prayer, both public and private, plays a less than central role in mainline Protestantism. Prayer was important in the life of Jesus and in the early church. Prayer continues to have an important function in the Christian life.

There is a surprising paucity of resources in the theology of prayer. The major theologians say little on the subject. Books on prayer fail to tackle the basic theological questions. Prayer and theology appear to be two separate dimensions of Christian experience.

On the hunch that there is some connection between the low status of prayer in contemporary Protestant life and the limited resources for a theology of prayer, this study offers resources for the practice of prayer in the framework of a process theology of prayer.

The study is composed of three parts. The core, or middle section, is designed to be used as a study guide for lay people on the topic: "Thinking About Prayer". In five sessions or chapters, four questions are addressed: (1) How Can We Think About God? (2) How Can We Think About Prayer? (3) How Can We Pray? and (4) What Difference Does Prayer Make? The answers are drawn from four sources: (1) scripture, (2) the hymns and prayers of the church (the United Methodist tradition primarily), (3) process theology, and (4) general literature on prayer.

An introduction to this center section is provided by an autobiographical account of the development of the author's interest in prayer and process theology.

The concluding section is "A Reflective Postscript." Two contemporary approaches to prayer are analyzed in light of Friedrich Heiler's definition of the two major types of personal piety--the mystical and the prophetic. Evangelical prayer, as described by Donald Bloesch, is seen to stand in the tradition of prophetic prayer. Contemplative prayer, as described by Thomas Merton, is a contemporary expression of the mystical tradition. In contrast, a process theology of prayer offers a both/and alternative. Mystical prayer experiences can be understood in terms of communication with the primordial nature of God. Prophetic prayer can be understood in relationship to the consequent nature of God.

Although a process theology of prayer is not able to lift the veil of mystery from the experience of prayer, by providing a theological framework open to both God and the world and to communication between the two, it can make a significant contribution to contemporary Christian spirituality.

Part I

HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONAL INTEREST IN PRAYER AND PROCESS THEOLOGY

My special interest in prayer began in my first appointment after seminary, in Palo Alto, California. I had not considered going into the pastoral ministry until midway through my last quarter of seminary at Pacific School of Religion. I had intended to do some kind of administrative work for the church. An invitation from the California-Nevada Conference Cabinet to consider ordination, accompanied by warm encouragement from then District Superintendent Wilbur Choy, opened up this possibility. The bureaucratic wheels were greased by old friendships with people in decision-making positions, and I slid into the United Methodist ministry in six weeks time. I had not taken courses in preaching and the seminary offered nothing in prayer. My first Sunday in the new church I was in the pulpit, and my regular duty thereafter was to prepare a pastoral prayer. The congregation was above average in intelligence and education (140 PhD's in the congregation). My reaction to this professional assignment was panic--because I knew nothing about prayer except what I had absorbed from years of absent-minded attention at public worship. I had no clear sense of what prayer meant to me, and here I was charged with the responsibility of leading more than five hundred people in various

forms of prayer every week. I was also bothered by the hypocrisy of it all. Public prayers did not seem to mean anything to anybody. I felt like a hypocrite myself. I was creating the prayers more to impress those sophisticated people than to communicate with God. I felt, to my deep chagrin, that my early efforts were nothing more than fancy words signifying nothing. I worked hard at them. I tried to be true to the depth voices in my being--and to some extent I was. Occasionally someone would thank me for a prayer, so there was some communication of significance taking place. But I felt incompetent, and uncomfortable with what I was doing.

This discomfort was the motivation for my early explorations into the literature of prayer. Friends recommended some good books of liturgical prayers. I found in them some themes and images for prayers that touched me and I could use. But the models they offered still left me dissatisfied.

During Lent of my first year there, I offered a course on prayer, using Anthony Bloom's Beginning to Pray. The course attracted a number of people who were also interested in prayer. We practiced the discipline of a daily devotional time, and remembered each other by name in prayer daily as part of the class. We learned some valuable things, and developed a surprising level of community in the six weeks together.

The next year in Lent, I again offered a series of

classes on prayer, this time on John Magee's Reality and Prayer. Magee came at the end of the series and led a week-end retreat for class members. His leadership in meditation, fantasy and mental prayer made possible a major step forward for all of us on the retreat. Suddenly there was a community of eighteen or so people all turned on to the inner life of prayer. We continued to work together over the next three years, with studies on the major doctrines of the Christian faith, and each Lent a new study on prayer. John Magee came a second year and led us through many of the same experiences and some new ones. This time we were able to ask questions of our "guru" out of experience, and to perceive things we had missed on the first retreat.

I found that I was elated, relaxed and feeling particularly integrated as a result of the inward focusing and contemplation exercises at the retreats. But we did not organize continuing groups to support the people in practicing the things that we had learned. Support groups later developed among some of the people, and one of these groups has now met weekly for more than five years. But I did not get into a group. I found that I did not have what it took to keep up the practice of a daily period of meditation by myself. I would get started, then my mind would move to the tasks of the day. My anxiety level would rise, and I would fidget out of my chair and into the day.

Also, I had difficulty translating the experience of mental prayer to public liturgy. I began to use periods of silence with suggestions for prayer, and found that this worked well for me and for many of the congregation. This enabled them to do mental prayer in a guided structure.

When I moved to Seattle, to my second parish, I continued to use this format for a period of congregational prayer in the order of service each Sunday. I tried to select prayer themes that I knew were subjects of live concern for the people, and to make some of the suggestions so general that they could go off in their own personal direction with it. Often the silence during such prayer times was intense, as if no one were even breathing. I felt that I was interrupting real communication when I spoke up to offer the next suggestion. But I still felt awkward about prayers that I had to construct with words. My practice was moving beyond my theology, and I did not know where to go from there.

I had been in Seattle for about a year when I received an invitation to speak to a group of three hundred church women on the subject of prayer. I decided that I preferred to lead them in experiencing prayer. I chose to give them brief introductions to the classic forms of prayer, and then to lead them in prayer exercises, drawing on Magee, Bloom and the Workbook of Living Prayer by Maxie Dunnam. The session was smashingly successful--a quantum leap in prayer for many of the women. Since the women had come from

all over Washington, the word spread. I was invited to lead two week-end retreats on prayer for women's groups. Both retreats had about eighty women all of whom were in leadership positions in their local churches. What highs these experiences were! We laughed and cried and praised and confessed and expressed our personal needs and our concerns and really prayed together. It was marvelous and we were all joyful about it. There was again an awareness of communication with the Spirit of God that made life good. I experienced again that sense of inspiration and integration that I remembered from the retreats with John Magee.

About this time I discovered that public worship was having a new meaning for me. I missed it when I could not be there--not so much for the hearing of the scripture and the sermon as for the prayers. No matter how poor they were, I needed to be in a structure of adoration, confession, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, dedication in the same way that I needed breakfast, lunch and dinner. My "soul" had been nourished, and I was now aware of my own hunger. Other people were feeling the same way. Our excitement in sharing this experience was electric.

With my marriage and move to southern California, I became detached from that community and from leadership roles in the church. But I became attached to the academic community of the School of Theology at Claremont. In anticipating this change, I realized that here was an

opportunity to focus my attention on my theology of prayer. Friends in Washington were enthusiastic about the possibility and encouraged me to think about publishing something out of my study and experience.

While at Palo Alto I had also worked with process theology, leading a class of lay people in the study of God and the World by John Cobb. I found there a theology with which both sides of my brain could be at peace. At Claremont there was the possibility of working on my theology of prayer in connection with the Center of Process Studies.

One of the surprises in this process has been the paucity of resources in the theology of prayer. The major theologians seem to have little to say explicitly on the subject. Books on prayer deal with "how-to" and report experience, but fail to tackle the basic theological questions. I have sometimes felt that I have been trying to build a bridge between two separate dimensions of Christian experience, prayer and theology.

I have also been surprised at the low status of prayer in mainline Protestantism. There are very few Protestants in the area for whom this is a major interest or concern. There is no course in prayer in the curriculum of the seminary and no course that pays significant attention to prayer. This is true of other United Methodist seminaries to some extent. At best, a course on prayer is offered only every two or three years. The books on prayer in the

library are mostly old. When I attend worship in area churches, the associate minister is often assigned the leadership in prayer while the senior minister does the preaching. When I guest preach, I ask if the host minister would like me to also lead the congregation in prayer. The answer is almost always, "Oh no, I'll get one of the lay-people to do that!"

It has occurred to me to wonder if there is some connection between the low status of prayer in contemporary Christian life and the limited resources for our theology of prayer.

My interest in growing in the life of prayer and in working on my theology of prayer continues to be high. I am motivated both by my own personal hunger and by my desire to be better equipped to help other people in this dimension of the Christian experience.

There is interest. Lay people do sign up for classes, workshops and retreats in prayer. In the needs assessment research of the faculty Continuing Education Committee, clergy interest in both public and private prayer was high. When I discuss my project with people, there is inevitably an enthusiastic response, and interest in seeing my results.

In response to this interest, I am eager to create a study guide for use with lay people. I have become somewhat sobered by my own experience with books. I have received only minimal help in my own growth from that source.

Times of significant growth for me have come when someone has led me in new experiences of prayer, going with me through it step by step. So my expectations for what I can do in the print medium are less than they were when I began. My primary interest now is to create something that I can use in face-to-face situations with people who want to share this pilgrimage with me.

Part II

A STUDY GUIDE FOR LAY PEOPLE:

"THINKING ABOUT PRAYER"

Session One: Introduction

Session Two: How Can We Think About God?

Session Three: How Can We Think About Prayer?

Session Four: How Can We Pray?

Session Five: What Difference Does Prayer Make?

SESSION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air.¹

PRAYER IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Once upon a time, a group of people came together on a Sunday morning in a church sanctuary. An organist and a choir performed beautiful music. A member of the congregation read from the Bible. Announcements were made. A story was told to the children. The minister preached a sermon. An offering was taken. There was more beautiful music. Then the people moved to the church parlor for coffee hour. There had been no word of prayer spoken or sung anywhere in the service--no praise or thanksgiving, no confession of wrongdoing, no request for God's forgiveness, no petitions for one's own needs, no intercessions for the needs of the world, no dedication of the offering, no prayer of blessing at parting. Many words about God had been spoken, but no words to God. No one noticed the omission. A few people had a nagging sense that something had not been quite right. But they could not put their finger on just what. The stimulation of the coffee and conversation

¹James Montgomery (1771-1854), "Prayer is the Soul's Sincere Desire" in The Book of Hymns: Official Hymnal of the United Methodist Church (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1966) #252.

soon put it out of their minds.

Could this be a true story?

Once upon a time these same people went their separate ways. On Tuesday one of them, George Davis, went into the hospital. He was scheduled to have surgery on Wednesday morning for a recurring malignancy in his intestinal tract. In the middle of the night, he woke up trembling with fear. In desperation he rolled over, clutched his pillow and cried, "O God, help me!" Anxiety about future days of suffering swept over him. The more he thought about the negative possibilities of his situation, the more anxious he became. So he called the nurse and asked for a strong sedative to quiet his nerves.

On Wednesday afternoon, Susan Carter had a quarrel with her husband. It was a recurring quarrel--one in which Susan was becoming increasingly frustrated. Harry had smoked cigarettes for as long as she had known him. But in the last year, as job pressures had mounted, it seemed that he constantly had a cigarette in his hand. Not only was it a nuisance around the house and a strain on the budget, but Susan was worried about Harry's health. Today, however, when she brought up the subject again, Harry blew up and stalked out of the house. Susan sank into a chair with tears of frustration welling up in her eyes. Out of the swirling rush of emotion a prayer emerged: "God, I give up. You stop Harry from smoking!"

The Jones family was accustomed to having grace before the evening meal. As they gathered around the table full of steaming food, Mr. Jones scowled at his chattering children until everybody quieted down. Then he bowed his head, and muttered rapidly the words of the grace he used every evening. The younger children were not sure what he was saying for the words all ran together.

No one else in the congregation prayed that week. Could this be a true story?

Prayer, both public and private, plays a less than central role in the life of most mainline Protestant Christians. Protestants typically go to church to hear the sermon and the music and to see their friends. Much of our private experience of prayer is the "foxhole prayer" of desperation, the use of prayer as a magic charm, or prayer as empty ritual.

PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

It is instructive to compare the role of prayer in our lives with the far more central place of prayer in the life of Jesus. The Gospels report that he prayed in the midst of his ordinary life. He left his disciples to go out alone into the desert early in the morning, or up into the mountains at the end of a busy day to pray. He went out into the mountains "and all night he continued in prayer to God" (Lk 6:12) before he chose his disciples. He prayed alone.

Sometimes he took his disciples with him. (Lk 9:28 and Mk 14:32) He prayed for other people. The mothers brought their children to him "that he might lay his hands on them and pray." (Mt. 19:3) He told Peter that he had prayed for him, that his faith might not fail. (Lk. 22:32) He prayed for his enemies. From the cross he prayed for those who crucified him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Lk 23:34) And he prayed for himself. The Gospels record words from the Garden of Gethsemane and from the cross. "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." (Mk 14:36) "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." (Lk 23:46) His followers remembered and preserved teachings that revealed the value of prayer to him. Among the few teachings phrased in the form of a commandment was his "Ask, seek, knock." Luke reports a discourse on prayer as follows:

He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.'"

And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity, he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and

it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk 11: 1-13)

PRAYER IN THE EARLY CHURCH

It is also instructive to look at the role of prayer in the early church. The story of the birth of the church begins with a group of men and women gathered in an upper room in prayer (Acts 1:14) After Pentecost, the new converts "devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42) The first deacons were appointed to care for the needs of the growing community so that the twelve could devote themselves to prayers and to the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:1-4) Paul reports to the members of the churches to whom he writes, "I have been praying for you", and he repeatedly asks them to pray for him. (I Thess. 5:25, Rom. 15:30, 2 Cor. 1:11, Col. 4:3) Sometimes this request is open-ended, sometimes it is specific. In prison, Paul spent his time in prayer and "singing hymns to God". (Acts 16:25) In his teachings, he commends the life of prayer. To the church at Philippi, he says:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. (Phil. 4:6)

To the Thessalonians, he says:

Rejoice always, pray constantly. (I Thess. 5:17)

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air

says one of the popular hymns of the church. Another proclaims:

O where are kings and empires now
Of old that went and came?
But, Lord, thy church is praying yet,
A thousand years the same.²

FORMAT FOR THIS STUDY

This study assumes the continuing importance of prayer in the Christian life. The pilgrimage to Christian maturity is both an inward journey and an outward journey, a matter of the heart attuning to God and the hand stretching out to the world. In recent decades, major emphasis in the mainline Protestant churches has been put on the journey outward, the work of the kingdom in combatting poverty, hunger, war, sexism, evil and suffering in all their many forms. The result has been a one-sided development of the Christian life and an impoverishment of the Christian church. The life of service not balanced by the life of devotion produces burned-out social activists and sterile institutions devoid of the Spirit--a program of good works without the inner resources

²Arthur Cone (1818-1896), "O Where Are Kings and Empires Now" in Pilgrim Hymnal (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1966) #264.

to stick with it.

The purpose of this study is not to call Christians away from the world. It is to call Christians to prayer so that there can be wholeness to the pilgrimage of Christian life, and direction and fuel for the journey.

The format of this study includes resources for both praying and thinking about prayer.

RESOURCES FOR PRAYING

Martin Luther once said, "None can believe how powerful prayer is, and what it is able to effect, but those who have learned it by experience."³ The primary way in which one grows in the life of prayer is by praying. It is possible to talk about prayer, to describe much about it. But our prayers can go where our thoughts about prayer cannot follow.

Therefore, an integral part of this study is the experiencing of a daily period of personal prayer for the duration of the study. A pattern is suggested here for your consideration and modification to your personal needs and circumstances. St. Theresa of Avila has been quoted as saying. "The best way to pray is the way you pray best." Each of us needs to create an approach that seems natural

³Martin Luther, The Table Talk (London: Bell, 1878) p. 155.

and that fits where we are. The pattern described here reflects centuries of experience in Christian devotion, and yet it is only one of the many possible patterns. The general outline is:

- I. Preparation and centering
- II. Meditative reading of scripture
- III. Prayer
- IV. Silence

The specifics of each of these steps will be described in more detail in Session Four on the question: "How Can We Pray?". You can begin to experience the pattern now and be ready to reflect on it later.

Preparation for prayer is important. A quiet place and at least thirty minutes uninterrupted time is assumed by what is suggested here. If you plan to use a Bible, a notebook, a hymnal, or other devotional resources, they should be close at hand.

Position for praying depends on the person and the circumstances. Kneeling with the head bowed and the eyes closed has been a tradition in Christian worship as a symbol of humility before God. Popular for private worship is the sitting position, in a straight chair with feet flat on the floor, body bent at the knees and hips at ninety degree angles. The head should be at an angle to look straight ahead if the eyes are opened. All of the muscles of the body can be deeply relaxed in this position, so it lends

itself to stillness. Some people prefer the yoga position, others stand or lie down to pray. Reducing sense stimulation by closing the eyes is helpful to many people. Others find that looking at a religious object like a cross or crucifix helps focus their attention.

Centering is a process of pulling the attention into a focus, so that the mind can move to the heart. Simple awareness exercises may help. You can begin by being aware of your feelings. Identify your own present state of being. How are you at this present moment? What is it like to be you right now? Are you happy, angry, depressed, excited, relaxed, anxious? What are you feeling? If you keep a journal, you may want to write your feelings. If your mind is spinning, you may need to take a few minutes to quiet the flow of your thoughts. One technique is to imagine your mind as a whirling system of turning wheels. Visualize the wheels as slowing in their turning until they are barely moving. Be aware of your body. Are you tense, feeling pain, hungry, tired, tingling? If your body is tense, you may want to intentionally relax your muscles. Focus on one set of muscles at a time, muscles of the face, the neck, the shoulders, etc., tensing them deliberately and then letting them relax. As you begin to center in, be aware of your environment, the sounds you can hear, the smells you can smell, other signals of which you are aware. This helps you center in the present moment--the here and now.

Attention to breathing can help you to grow quiet. Taking a few slow, deep breaths can make deep relaxation possible. Observe the gentle breathing in of cool air through the nostrils and into the lungs, and then the breathing out of warm air, relaxing into the natural rhythm prepares the mind for the inner communion of prayer.

At first this centering process may take a few minutes. With practice, centering can be a matter of just a few seconds. It is important preparation for being present to the experience of prayer.

A passage of scripture will be suggested for meditative reading for each day of the week. Approach the reading open to hear what God may be saying to you. Read until something strikes you. There is no need to rush through a passage. Stop and reflect as you feel led. If you are using a notebook, you may want to record insights, applications, nudges from your reflection.

Prayers may simply bubble out spontaneously from the process of getting in touch with your self and the meditative reading of scripture. However, the traditional modes of prayer all have a place in the personal prayer life. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, dedication do not all need to be included in each day's prayer. But it is helpful to touch base with all of them on a fairly regular basis to be sure that your prayers are not becoming one-sided.

To help with this, each week's suggestions for prayer will offer a series of sentences to be completed as starting places for prayers. You may want to complete these sentences in a workbook or journal as a way to help you be in touch with the depth voices in your being. Don't let writing them down take the place of sharing them with God! If you write them, then also pray them.

If you are using this study in a group, you may want to commit yourselves to remember each other daily in prayer during the period of this study. You may also want to plan some time for sharing in the group about your experiences in these daily periods of personal prayer.

And finally, there is a time of silence in the presence of God, a time for resting in God's presence. This may be the most awkward and difficult part at first, but give it a try. You may find that you like it!

RESOURCES FOR THINKING ABOUT PRAYER

This study assumes not only the importance of praying, but also the importance of thinking about prayer. One possible reason for the contemporary neglect of the devotional life may well be the fact that there has been so little clear thinking about prayer. Our minds have been so shaped by the scientific revolution of the past two hundred years that we are embarrassed and uncomfortable in the face of practices that defy critical scientific analysis. Prayer thus becomes

a meaningless vestige of the past, existing in the shadowy realm of magic and superstition. We may still go through the form, but we are not sure what we are doing. Occasionally there are eruptions of desperation from the human spirit in extreme circumstances. But even then we are not sure we could explain or justify the experience to ourselves or to anyone else in calmer circumstances. We are hard put to give an account of the faith that is in us. On the hunch that this uncertainty about how to think about prayer is an inhibition to the life of prayer, this study provides resources for trying to make sense of our experience of prayer.

Prayer is natural. We are created with the capacity to pray. God gives us the gift of this special communication. We do not have to wait to have a perfectly constructed, carefully analyzed theology of prayer before we begin to pray. We can simply accept the gift and pray.

But God has also given us minds with which to analyze our experience. Thinking about prayer is one way to grow in the devotional life. If we have not separated prayer from magic, thinking about prayer can help us to do this. If our prayer life is limited to a few memorized prayers learned in childhood, thinking about prayer can open a new world of possibilities. If our prayer life has been frustrating and discouraging, thinking about prayer may help to uncover the problems. There will be unanswered questions, of course. But there can be answered ones too!

This process of thinking about prayer will be pursued with the use of four questions:

1. How can we think about God?
2. How can we think about prayer?
3. How can we pray?
4. What difference does prayer make?

Resources for answering these questions will be drawn from scripture, the tradition of the Christian church, reason and experience. The scriptures will be from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The tradition will come from the hymns of the church and prayers of the liturgy and of a few great Christians. The philosophical thought forms will come from process theology, drawing primarily on the work of John Cobb and David Griffin, who have, in turn based their work on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. The experience of many people across the centuries who have written and spoken on the subject of prayer will be interspersed as testimony.

Material for each session will include:

- (1) A discussion of the question for the session;
- (2) Questions for reflection and discussion;
- (3) Suggestions for a period of personal prayer for each day of the week between sessions.

This material is designed in five segments that can be used in five sessions. However groups may want more time on each question. Scripture passages for personal devotional

reading can be used for two or more days each without exhausting all of their possibilities. So what has been provided here for one week can be used for two or more weeks. Study groups should feel free to adapt these resources to their own pace.

The material assumes the desirability of sharing this pilgrimage of thinking about prayer. Individuals can use the resources separately, but there are decided advantages to sharing the experiences with a group--or at least one "soul friend".

One last word needs to be said about the relationship of this material to public prayer. Prayer is essentially the same thing whether it is individual or corporate. This material is written with the personal devotional life in mind. However, most of what is said is applicable to corporate prayer as well.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What role does prayer play in your life? In the life of your Christian community? What role would you like for prayer to play?
2. Are you satisfied with your prayer life? Are you satisfied with the prayer experience of your Christian community? What changes would you like to see?
3. What blocks you from growing in prayer?
4. What helps you grow in prayer?
5. What problems have you encountered when you pray?
6. What has been your experience of prayer?
7. What unanswered questions do you have about prayers?
8. Are you willing to commit yourself to a daily period of thirty minutes for meditation and prayer while using this study guide?
9. Do we as a group want to make a commitment to pray for each other daily while we are using this study together?

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS FOR WEEK ONE

I. PREPARATION AND CENTERING

If you are not in the habit of having a time for personal prayer each day, you may want to pay special attention to this time of preparation during this first week. Get in a comfortable place and position where you can be free of interruptions. Ask those with whom you live for help, if necessary. Find the day's passage in the Bible. Using the suggestions given in the material for Session One, spend at least five minutes getting in touch with yourself, your feelings, your body, your environment. You may want to use the suggestions for relaxing and becoming quiet, and to pay attention to your breathing for a few minutes before turning to the scripture.

II. MEDITATIVE READING OF THE SCRIPTURE

If you have a one-volume Bible commentary, you may want to read what it says about your passage to give you some background about what you are reading. Then read with the expectation that the Holy Spirit may speak to you. You may want to keep a journal of the insights that come to you as you read and meditate.

Day One: Philippians 4:4-7

Day Two: Exodus 33:7-23

Day Three: Romans 8:9-11

Day Four: Psalm 139:1-18

Day Five: Isaiah 49:14-16

Day Six: Romans 8:38-39

Day Seven: Luke 15:8-10

III. PRAYERS

You may want to make notes here, adding to the list each day, or you may want to keep a journal with separate space for each day. It is not necessary to write anything, of course.

Adoration: I rejoice in your presence, God, because
 . . .

Confession: I am feeling badly about some things I have done and some things I have left undone during the past week. I want to confess these to you, and ask for your forgiveness . . .

Thanksgiving: Today I am especially thankful for . . .

Petition: Three of my deepest needs or strongest desires are . . .

Intercession: I am concerned about these people
and these situations and I want to
share this concern with you . . .

Dedication: As a result of this prayer I intend
to . . .

IV. SILENCE

You may want to close your prayer time each day this
week with the old hymn recently revived in the musical
show Godspell.

Day by day,
Dear Lord, of the three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly,
Love thee more dearly,
Follow thee more nearly,
Day by day.⁴

⁴St. Richard of Chichester (1197-1253), "Day by Day"
in Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A.
(New York: Church Pension Fund, 1940) #429.

SESSION TWO: HOW CAN WE THINK ABOUT GOD?

"The greatest problem with prayer today," says John Cobb, "is the image of that to which it is directed."¹ When we have no clear conception of what God is like, where God is to be found, and how God relates to the world, we are likely to be hesitant and limited in prayer. So the starting place for a discussion of thinking about prayer can very reasonably be some reflection on how we can think about God.

OUR CONCEPTS OF GOD CAN ALWAYS GROW

One way we can approach the challenge of thinking about God is to compare it to the experience of thinking about another person. There are some important similarities between these two experiences. But this is a limited and potentially misleading analogy. There are important differences as well. We will start with the similarities and note the limits to the analogy later.

One thing that can be said about thinking about another person is that what you think and what the other person is are never exactly the same. We are never able to completely perceive everything that another person is. No one can ever know us just as we are. We may think that we

¹John Cobb, "Spiritual Discernment in a Whiteheadian Perspective" in Harry James Cargas and Bernard Lee (eds.) Religious Experience and Process Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1976) p. 363.

know or understand another person well. But people who have lived together for more than fifty years acknowledge that there is always an element of surprise in the relationship, always something more to be learned about the other. This mystery of the otherness that can never be plumbed is even more true in our relationship with God. The being of God is beyond our comprehension. We can think many things about God, but our thoughts can never encompass all of the Being of God.

One of the classics of Christian spirituality describes God as hidden completely from our view by a "cloud of unknowing".² The anonymous 14th century writer says that God's being is so much beyond our comprehension that our human language can never express that Being. Even our thoughts cannot come near to what God is.

In the book of Exodus there are a couple of stories about attempts made by Moses to comprehend who God is. In the third chapter, he asks for God's name. In the Hebrew culture, this was a way to ask for the key to God's identity. The answer he receives is "I am who I am." (Ex 3:14) In the thirty third chapter, he asks to see God's glory. He is permitted only a partial vision, and he is told that no one can see God and live.

²The Cloud of Unknowing by an English Mystic of the Fourteenth Century (London: Bruns, Oates and Washbourne, 1947).

God remains beyond our comprehension. There is always mystery, and more to be known.

A second thing that can be said about thinking about another person is that our concepts of them can grow. The first time I encounter another person I may be scarcely aware of her or him at all. Those of us who live in larger towns and cities are exposed to many people whose existence we virtually ignore. We have almost no concept at all of other drivers on the highway, strangers in a crowd at a ball game, and sometimes even our neighbors down the street. If we do notice, we perceive initially the superficial data, age, sex, race, appearance. If we are willing to commit time and energy to the process, and the other person is willing to be known, it is possible to vastly expand this initial perception. The middle-aged man who delivers our mail each day may be discovered to be an affectionate and indulgent father to two lively teenagers, a regular Thursday night bowler, a whiz at growing tomatoes, and much, much more.

Likewise, our concept of God can grow. Our scriptures, in fact, record the growth in the idea of God of our ancestors in faith over the period of more than a thousand years. One of the most fascinating developments is the conceptualization of how God was present with them.

As the Hebrews went out of slavery in Egypt into the wilderness, they perceived God's presence as with them in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by

night. After the debacle at Mt. Sinai with the golden calf, God sent an angel to be their constant guide. But Moses established a Tent of Meeting where anyone of the people could meet with God in time of need. (Exodus 33:7) The pillar of cloud would come down and settle on that tent. Later the presence of God came to be associated with a box or ark which contained objects of religious value. In the story of King David, the people, finally settled in their new land, considered building a permanent house for the ark, for God's presence. (I Sam 5:1 - 6:16) Here an interesting transition takes place in the thinking of the people. God did not want a house of wood. God would create a "house"--the house of David. God's presence would be in a dynasty. It became assumed that the Messiah would come from the House of David, since God was present in a special way in David's descendants.

In the New Testament, God is present in Christ. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world . . ." (2 Cor 5:19) The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory . . . (John 1:14) Later God's presence came into the church in the Holy Spirit. In Paul's letters, the Spirit dwells in the Christian. (Rom 8:9, I Cor 3:16, Eph 5:18)

Our concepts of God can grow too. J. B. Phillips wrote a popular book entitled "Your God is Too Small" calling people to let their concepts grow. The "God is Dead" movement heralded not the death of God but the death

of some old ideas of God that needed to be discarded anyway. The fact that the bumper sticker "God is not dead--she is black" is shocking to many people is a clue that there is plenty of room for our concepts of God to grow.

WAYS WE GROW IN OUR CONCEPT OF GOD

Continuing our analogy, we grow in our concept of God in ways similar to the way we grow to know each other. For example, if I have just become acquainted with you, there are several ways that I could get to know you. I could get to know you by experiencing what you do with me. If you listen carefully to what I say, hear my feelings behind my words and let me know that you hear and care, I will come to think of you as a kind and sensitive person. The Hebrew people came to think of God as the one who led them out of slavery. Repeatedly in the Old Testament, God is introduced as "I am the one who led you up out of Egypt" Who God is was partially defined in terms of what God does, the way the people experienced God. We continue to sing about our experiences with God in our hymns and to speak about them in our liturgies.

He leadeth me, oh blessed thought
O Word with heavenly comfort fraught. . .³

³James H. Gilmore (1834-1918), "He Leadeth Me" in The Book of Hymns, #217.

We believe in the one God, maker and ruler of all things . . . the source of all goodness and beauty, all truth and love,
 We believe in Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, our teacher, example, and Redeemer, the Savior of the world.
 We believe in the Holy Spirit, God present with us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength.⁴

If we have experienced God as a comforting presence in a time of pain or sorrow or loneliness, then we can think of God as one who is close to us and who cares about us. If we have had a mystical "oceanic experience" of the oneness of all creation, then we can think of God as the one in whom the whole of creation has unity. If we have experienced the life and teachings of Jesus as giving guidance in setting our values, then we can think of God in Christ as "The Way", "The Truth".

A second way in which I can come to know you better is through what others tell me about their experiences with you. This is where our scripture and tradition come in. We have the record of centuries, thousands of years of the experience of people with God. The sum of the testimony in our Judeo-Christian heritage is a resource of incredible richness, adequate to more than a lifetime of exploration in terms of our own first-hand experience.

A third way in which I can come to a fuller, clearer concept of who you are is indirect. It may be that if I am

⁴From the Korean Creed in The Book of Hymns, #741.

to really see you, my perceptions of the nature of reality will have to change. For example, if we are a white slave owner and a black slave just before the Civil War, perceptions about the nature of reality most probably distort our perceptions of each other. Racism still blocks the process of thinking clearly about each other. A man who is convinced that "woman's only place is in the home" will have trouble seeing the unique gifts and capacities that equip women to be doctors, machinists, judges, and prime ministers as well. If his perception of the reality of the nature of womanhood is changed, then his way of thinking about a particular woman can grow.

As our perceptions of the reality of our universe expand, our concept of God can grow as well. In a world of space travel, it is no longer appropriate to think of God as up there in the sky. New understandings of the nature of reality coming to us through scientific research are not a threat to the existence of God, just a challenge to us to grow in our ways of thinking about God.

But the best way for me to get to know you is if you choose to reveal yourself to me. If you decide that you would like for me to know you, and you decide to tell me about yourself, to show me who you are, then I have my best chance for growing in my concept of you. Christians believe that this is what God has done in Jesus Christ. God has come to be with us in Christ as a way of answering the age-old

question expressed by Moses, "Let us see your glory." Christ is sometimes referred to as our "window on divinity" for in Christ we are able to see into the nature of God. For Christians, Christ is the supreme revelation. If we want to grow in our ways of thinking about God, we can attend to listening to what God has chosen to share with us in Christ.

Further, it is part of the testimony of Christians that this revelation continues through the presence with us of the Spirit of the Risen Christ or the Holy Spirit. God's self-revelation was not just a one-time event.

One final use of our limited analogy may be appropriate to our purposes here. I do not need to wait until I get to know you perfectly and completely before I establish a relationship with you. In fact, if I do not establish some kind of relationship with you, my chances of getting to know you in any significant way are pretty slim. It is possible for me to begin to communicate with you when we first meet. My relationship with you and my concept of you can grow together. If I wait until I know everything about you before I begin to relate to you, I may just never get around to it. It is possible for us to worship that in the nature of God which calls forth adoration from us before we have our concepts of God all worked out. It is possible for us to share our concerns and to listen for the word of God to us without having our images crystal clear. It is possible to have a significant relationship, even to love, without knowing

everything there is to know about the other.

GOD AS MORE THAN PERSONAL SPIRIT

Thinking about God is also different from thinking about another person. It is easy for us to think about God as a person because so much of the Biblical imagery is personal. God walks in the Garden of Eden, bargains with Abraham, gets angry at Mt. Sinai, talks to the prophets. It is easy to understand how Michelangelo could paint God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as an old man with a white beard floating in the clouds. There is something in all of us that needs to think of God as personal. "Personal" easily becomes "person". If God is a person, then the next logical step is to create God in our own image with a physical body. The masculine form of God's body is the product of the patriarchal society in which our faith has taken roots and grown. The Deity is always identified with that which is most highly valued in a society. In some cultures, the god is female, in some it is an animal or tree or mountain. Our patriarchal ancestors saw God as a human-like male. The long white beard is probably the product of the ancient association of wisdom with age.

But God is spirit. "God is spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth," John reports Jesus as saying to the Samaritan woman at the well. The writer of the first letter to Timothy speaks of God as

"immortal, invisible." (I Tim 1:17) This text has been set to music in one of the great hymns of the church, "Immortal, invisible, God only wise; In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes."⁵

Thinking of God as spirit is not so difficult if we refer once again to the analogy of human relationships. When I relate to you, I relate to more than your body. We communicate through our bodies, our voices and ears, our movements and eyes, our sense of touch. But the kindness and sensitivity that I have come to know are expressions of your spirit. But there is a difference between our finite human spirit and the eternal divine Spirit. God is not just a larger disembodied version of our human "spirit". God is not confined to the possibilities of personality.

Another way of saying this same thing is to say that God is more than personal. This means that God is at least personal, for God is able to communicate with the personal dimension of creation and to be involved in personal relationships. God is not impersonal. God can be addressed as a "Thou", a personal being. Because we know only two kinds of personal beings, male and female, and our language provides for conversation only about "he's" and "she's", we get

⁵walter Chalmers Smith (1824-1908), "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise" in The Book of Hymns, #27.

caught in the trap of referring to God as "he".⁶ But God's being transcends sexuality, is Spirit, is more than personal. Getting our minds around what it means to be "more than personal divine Spirit" may be the toughest part of the process of thinking about God.

What more is it possible for us to think? For our faith to be healthy and effective, our perceptions of God must fit with our general experience of reality. It must be consistent with what we know about how the universe functions. To be Christian, our concept of God must be also scriptural. Poised as we are near the end of the twentieth century of the Christian tradition and at the end of the second century of the scientific revolution, what can we say about the nature of God that is both reasonable and Christian?

It is both Christian and reasonable to think of God as present with us in every moment. Primitive images of God usually have located God "out there" somewhere. "Out there" is often also "up there" in heaven. Much of our religious language projects this sense of distance between ourselves

⁶A major issue in thinking about God today is how to avoid communicating that God is male or masculine. Many women are protesting that the image of a male God makes an important contribution to maintaining the oppression of women in Christian societies. A number of solutions to this problem are in the experimental stage. Biblical passages reflecting the feminine nature of God are being given fresh attention. Some women believe that we need to have a period of time when we worship the Goddess in order to shatter old images of God as male. In this paper, no male references to God will appear in the text, and some quotes will be

and God. Certainly God may be thought of as beyond us--up there and out there. But God can also be thought of as with us and within us.

J. P. De Caussade (1675-1751) wrote about the "sacrament of the present moment", for, he said, that is where God can be found.

Faith sees that Jesus Christ lives in everything and works through all history to the end of time, that every fraction of a second, every atom of matter contains a fragment of his hidden life and his secret activity.⁷

Later he adds:

God's action penetrates every atom of your body, into the very marrow of your bones.⁸

John Cobb speaks of the absolute nearness of God.

God is everywhere . . . God is immediately related to every place . . . there is nowhere one can flee from him.⁹

In more technical language, he says:

Every other entity can somehow be distanced, either as temporally past, or spatially separate, but God's presence is absolutely present. He is numerically other and qualitatively, incomprehensibly other. But

modified to remove these references. Such modification will be noted by brackets. Masculine titles and pronouns not removed are to be understood as symbolic, not literal.

⁷Jean-Pierre De Caussade, Abandonment to the Divine Providence (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975) p. 36.

⁸Ibid., p. 55.

⁹John B. Cobb, Jr., God and the World (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) p. 77.

this other is spatio-temporally not distant at all . . .
We are literally in God and God is literally in us.¹⁰

The Jerusalem Bible translates Romans 8:9 as "The Spirit of God has made his home in you."

Dame Julian of Norwich reports her religious experience in becoming aware of this absolute presence of God.

Then our Lord opened my spiritual eyes and showed me the soul in the middle of my heart . . . Nor will he quit the place he holds in our soul forever--as I see it. For in us is he completely at home and has his eternal dwelling.¹¹

The implications of this way of thinking about God are important for the way we think about prayer, especially for those who have groped around for God outside of themselves somewhere. Madame Guyon reports the spiritual advice given to her by a Franciscan friar. "Madame, you are seeking without that which you have within. Accustom yourself to seek God in you own heart and you will find him."¹²

Samuel Longfellow has written a hymn that expresses the church's faith in this absolute nearness of God.

God of the earth, the sky, the sea
Maker of all above, below.
Creation lives and moves in thee
Thy present life through all doth flow.

¹⁰John B. Cobb, Jr., A Christian Natural Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965) p. 243.

¹¹Kenneth Leech, True Prayer (London: Sheldon Press, 1980) p. 4.

¹²Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Meaning of Prayer (New York: Association Press, 1949) p. 81.

Thy love is in the sunshine's glow,
 Thy life is in the quickening air,
 When lightnings flash and storm winds blow,
 There is thy power, thy law is there.

We feel thy calm at evening's hour
 Thy grandeur in the march of night
 And when the morning breaks in power,
 We hear thy word, "Let there be light."

But higher far, and far more clear,
 Thee in (our) spirit we behold:
 Thine image and Thyself are there
 Th' indwelling God, proclaimed of old.¹³

It follows naturally to think of the God who is present in every moment in our inner being as knowing every detail of our lives. The psalmist gives poetic expression to this experience of God:

O Lord, thou has searched me and known me!
 Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;
 thou discernest my thoughts from afar.
 Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,
 and art acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.
 Thou dost beset me behind and before,
 and layest thy hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 It is high, I cannot attain it.

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
 Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
 If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
 If I take the wings of the morning and dwell
 in the uttermost parts of the sea,
 even there thy hand shall lead me,
 and thy right hand shall hold me.
 If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,
 and the light about me be night,"
 even the darkness is not dark to thee,

¹³Samuel Longfellow (1819-1892), "God of the Earth, the Sea, the Sky" in The Book of Hymns #36.

the night is bright as the day;
for darkness is as light with thee.

For thou didst form my inward parts,
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise thee, for thou are fearful and wonderful.
Wonderful are thy works!
Thou knowest me right well;
my frame was not hidden from thee,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately wrought in the depth of the earth.
Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;
in thy book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.
How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
When I awake, I am still with thee. (Psalm 139:1-18)

In the story of the selection of David as King, the Lord says to Samuel, ". . . the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (I Sam 17:7)

One conception of God that makes prayer difficult is the "top-level executive" image. It is not surprising that in a world of giant bureaucracies and multi-national corporations, this kind of imagery should be a problem. We see top executives making only major decisions, surrounded by busy staffs who handle the details and the less important decisions. We hear that to make it to the top you have to know how to delegate. It is easy for that kind of hierarchical thinking to be transposed into our thinking about God. Such a God, of course, could not be bothered with us--unless, perhaps, we were desperate. We should only pray to such a God about the major problems of the world--wars, droughts,

hunger, injustice. Certainly there is no place for the ordinary cares and details of our lives.

Yet the early church remembered Jesus saying,
"Your father knows what you need before you ask him."
(Mt 6:8) God knows us even better than we know ourselves.
"Even the hairs of your head are all numbered." (Mt 10:30)

The God whose creative power has made possible the whole universe is present with us, in us, in every split second of our existence, knowing us behind all of our self-doubts, masks, and pretensions, knowing us more honestly and intimately than we know ourselves.

Another way of saying the same thing is to say that truth can only be perceived from the perspective of God. You cannot know me completely. Even I do not really know myself. Only God knows the full reality of who I am. The same is true of the truth about how the world is at any one time. There is important religious insight in the old cliché, "Only God knows!"

We can say this out of faith that this Spirit which is so near to us and knows us so well is beyond us, and beyond all of the creation. The word "transcendent" is an important word in the Christian tradition of thinking about God. It communicates that the God who dwells in the creation also exists beyond the creation. God is in the world, but the world does not contain all of God.

Oliver Wendell Holmes captures this vision of the

combination of the greatness and the nearness of God in a hymn:

Lord of all being, throned afar,
Thy glory flames from sun and star;
Center and soul of every sphere,
Yet to each loving heart how near!¹⁴

Sometimes in worship Christians become so conscious of God's nearness that they develop a kind of cozy, chum relationship with God that does not seem to take into account God's transcendence. This image of God almost resembles the ancient gods who were thought to belong to one particular tribe and to protect only their interests. God is not our private possession, but is the God of all creation.

John Magee points out:

We are led by Jesus to dare to call God "Father" in an intimate colloquy of the soul. . . . Yet we entirely miss the meaning of this intimate communion unless it is set against the awesome vastness of the Adorable Majesty. . . . The intimate and the ultimate . . . are qualities that mutually enrich one another. Only in the wedding of these polar truths is the mystery of God's gracious presence saved from stupid sentimentality. This does not mean that we are to be less intimate, but rather that we are to know this intimacy against the background of ultimacy.¹⁵

It is both Christian and reasonable to say that it is in God that we experience our unity with the whole of creation. God is present in every moment to every part of

¹⁴Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), "Lord of All Being" in The Book of Hymns, #64.

¹⁵John Magee, Reality and Prayer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978) p. 53.

the whole universe. In that co-presence we have our oneness with each other.

In Christ there is no east or west,
In him no south or north;
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.

In (God) shall true hearts everywhere
Their high communion find;
(God's) service is the golden cord
Close binding (humankind).¹⁶

Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "the global village" giving us a new way to refer to our increasingly close-knit world community. The recent space explorations have given us photographs of our one world and a new perception of our common destiny as a human race. But our common life is not a simple matter of physical proximity and interdependence. We are one with each other because of our common relationship to God. Paul Tillich describes God as the Ground of Being. Whitehead speaks of our existence in the universe as a matter of "through and through togetherness."¹⁷ God is "the binding element in the world."¹⁸ In God everything is inter-related with everything else.

¹⁶John Oxenham (1852-1941), "In Christ There Is No East or West" in The Book of Hymns, #192.

¹⁷Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: Free Press, 1967) p. 174.

¹⁸Alfred North Whitehead, Religion in the Making (New York: New American Library, 1974) p. 152.

GOD AS CREATIVE--RESPONSIVE LOVE

Now we come to the most incredible part of all. The Christian revelation of God is Christ has been summed up in three words; GOD IS LOVE. (I John 4:8) The Psalms, the hymnbook of the Old Testament, sing God's praises for steadfast love which is "abundant" (Psalm 69:3), "good" (Psalm 69:16), "great above the heavens" (Psalm 108:4), and "endures forever" (Psalm 107:1). The New Testament identifies the coming of Christ as the gift of God's love.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

This love of God is not "the emotional or intellectual imposition of a favorable viewpoint upon an object of love."¹⁹ It is not the sentimental affection that is sometimes associated with the word "love". The Biblical picture of divine love is of "an active benevolence that will go to any length to do good to the beloved object and to secure its well-being."²⁰ It is a relationship of "devotion, loyalty, intimate knowledge and responsibility."²¹ God's

¹⁹E. M. Good, "Love in the OT" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) III, 166.

²⁰G. Johnston, "Love in the NT" in *Ibid.*, III, 169.

²¹*Ibid.*, III, 164.

love is expressed in God's care for the whole creation.

In the Old Testament, God's gift of law was understood to be an expression of God's care for the people. The law regulated and protected relationships in the community. Righteousness was understood not as simple obedience to the law but as doing those things that preserved the peace and wholeness of that community. One of the most popular witnesses in the Old Testament to the nature of God is the word "righteousness" for God's actions were perceived as oriented to the well-being of the whole community.²²

Jesus expands this understanding of God's love by repeatedly addressing God as Father. God, says Jesus, cares for the creation, clothing the grass and feeding the ravens, and providing for the human creatures as well. (Lk 12:22-31) Jesus revealed this love in his life of concern and care for others. The depth of this love is made known in the cross.

Paul says that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (Romans 5:5) And he makes one of the great affirmations of Christian faith in this love in his letter to the Romans:

For I am sure that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities, nor things
present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height,
nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of
God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

²²E. R. Achtemeier, "Righteousness in the OT" in *Ibid.*, IV, 82.

One of the unique characteristics of Christian prayer is that it is communication with a divine being whose nature is love.

John Cobb and David Griffin point out that this love can be thought of in two ways: as creative love and as responsive love. In fact, all of the ways God is experienced in the Christian tradition can be understood as an expression of creative-responsive love.

As creative love, God calls the world to realize the ideal possibilities which are God's will for the world. De Caussade speaks of "God's treasury"²³ which is unlocked by faith. In God's treasury are all the possibilities for the maximum well-being of the creation. A variety of words are used to describe what God wills for us: shalom, strength of beauty, peace, complete fulfillment, the Kingdom of God. God is not a great cosmic Santa Claus to whom we come with a list, or the "vending machine in the sky" with handles for all the goodies we might desire. But God does desire that we realize the potentiality of each moment of our existence. And God calls us forward into a future of possibility. God confronts us in every moment where we are with what is possible for us.

Whitehead describes God as "the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth,

²³De Caussade, p. 37.

beauty and goodness."²⁴ God goes before us with the ideal possibilities for us, seeking to lure us on. These possibilities are geared to where we are in each moment. The decisions we have made in the past determine our starting place in creating the present. But the past does not determine completely what our present or our future shall be. God is actively present with us presenting us with new possibilities for our unique place in life. We are free to respond to God's "call forward". We cannot escape our past, or change it, but we do not have to be captives of the past. Because of God's activity in us and among us there can be progress in the world.

In a hymn based on Psalm 8, Curtis Beach describes this sense of being called into the future by God's creative love envisioning for us possibilities.

O how wondrous, O how glorious
Is thy name in every land!
Thou whose purpose moves before us
Toward the goal that thou hast planned.

Tis thy will our hearts are seeking,
Conscious of our human need.
Spirit in our spirits speaking,
Make us sons of God indeed!²⁵

The power which God uses in calling us forward is

²⁴Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality (New York: Free Press, 1978) p. 346.

²⁵Curtis Beach (1914-), "O How Glorious, Full of Wonder" in The Book of Hymns, #41, stanza 4.

the power of persuasion or attraction. Power is sometimes exercised by pushing, forcing altering by fiat. Power is sometimes exercised by attraction, influence, like a magnet.

As with a mother's tender hand,
God lead's his own, his chosen band.²⁶

This is the kind of power we witnessed in the life of Christ who came humbly, lived without the signs and symbols of coercive power, resisted in the desert the temptation to seek the power of force and yet had tremendous power to attract and to call forth the best in people. In the face of the dominating brute force of the Roman empire and the Jewish religious establishment of his time, he suffered the crucifixion. Yet the force of love that dwelt in Christ has ultimately prevailed. God works in the world through the persuasive power of love.

The church sings its faith in God's call forward:

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land.²⁷

He leadeth me, he leadeth me,
By his own hand he leadeth me.²⁸

God may be experienced not only as creative love,

²⁶Johann J. Schutz (1640-1690), "Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above" in The Book of Hymns, #4, stanza 3.

²⁷William Williams (1717-1791), "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" in The Book of Hymns, #271, stanza 1.

²⁸James H. Gilmore (1834-1918), "He Leadeth Me, O Blessed Thought" in The Book of Hymns, #217, Refrain.

but also as responsive love. We do not take advantage of all of the possibilities that God offers to us. In each moment, we have not only the influence of the past and the call of God into the future. We have our own free will. What we become is the result of what we choose to do with what we are given. We make mistakes. We fail. We choose destructive rather than constructive patterns of behavior. Sometimes we get ourselves in trouble. Sometimes forces and factors beyond our control cause us pain and suffering. Things don't go smoothly, accidents occur, disease develops, life gets messed up. God is present with us as responsive love.

O Love divine that stooped to share
 Our deepest pang, our bitterest tear,
 On thee we cast each earthborn care;²⁹
 We smile at pain while thou art near.

One of the images of God that blocks prayer is the image of the stern judge or divine criticizing parent waiting to catch us in disobedience in order to punish us severely. Such images may originate in childhood, when we hear threats that God will punish us if we misbehave. Such images lurking in the back of an adult mind need to be exorcised before prayer can become a positive opportunity.

One of the most beautiful pictures of the nature of

²⁹Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), "O Love Divine, That Stopped to Share" in The Book of Hymns, #270, stanza 1.

God is given in the parable of Jesus known as the Prodigal Son. A central figure in the parable, however, is the forgiving father who runs to welcome the child who has wasted all that he has been given. He calls for an extravagant celebration in honor of the fact that the prodigal has seen the errors of his ways and come back to the relationship of the family. And he bestows on him new gifts of grace. God's love is expressed in forgiveness offered in the face of our rejection and wandering ways.

God's offer of forgiveness is one of the central affirmations of the Christian faith. The scriptures testify to it:

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger
and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide, nor will he keep his
anger forever,
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor requite us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who
fear him; so far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities
those who fear him.
For he knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust.
(Psalm 103:6-14)

The great creeds of the church witness to it:

I believe in the forgiveness of sins . . .

The church sings its faith in forgiveness:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free.³⁰

³⁰ Charles Wesley (1707-1788), "O For a Thousand
Tongues to Sing" in The Book of Hymns, #1, stanza 4.

Our liturgy reflects it:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy great mercy hast promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn to thee: Have mercy upon us; pardon and deliver us from all our sins; confirm and strengthen us in all goodness; and bring us to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen³¹

God's forgiveness can be experienced in two ways. God accepts us just as we are, and in every moment offers to us new possibilities appropriate to where we are. No matter what we have done or have omitted doing, God is still with us leading us with creative love. We are "judged" by God in the sense that God "can give us only what we will receive",³² so those who are responsive to God are able to receive increasingly rich challenges, while those who are unresponsive have fewer opportunities. But wherever we are, God is there with us in that place.

God's forgiveness can also be experienced in what God does with our past. The past cannot be erased. But God takes the past into the divine being. The good, the bad, and the indifferent in the experience of the world are taken into God's own being as they become part of the past. There all of the values are synthesized and preserved. Whitehead concludes that God is able to use "what in the temporal world

³¹From "The Order for the Administration of the Sacrament of The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion" in The Book of Hymns, #830, p. 12.

³²Cobb, God and the World, p. 65.

is mere wreckage."³³

The beautiful persian rugs that are famous around the world are made on a frame with a group of boys on one side who feed threads through to an artist who sits on the other side giving directions. If one of the boys makes a mistake, the artist may change the design to compensate for the error. This error is not erased, but it becomes a part of a new design created to take it into account and still create a thing of beauty. This is a parable of God's forgiveness.

Our failure and sin is not without cost to God. The cross of Christ, the central symbol of Christianity, is the symbol of God's suffering for our sin. God has suffered and God continues to suffer for and with us. Whitehead describes God as "the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands."³⁴

All of this adds up to mean that God is affected by what we do. This may be seen as a shocking idea by some. Our ways of thinking about God have been influenced by Greek philosophy as well as by our scriptures. The idea that God is unchangeable has come into our heritage out of Greek philosophy. The God of responsive love is a God who is affected by what we do.

³³Whitehead, Process and Reality, p. 346.

³⁴Ibid., p. 351.

In the Old Testament we have the story of Abraham bartering with God to save the city of Sodom. God wants to destroy the city because of the evil that exists in it. Abraham convinces God to spare it for the sake of the righteous people who live there. God's mind is changed in relationship to Jonah and Jeremiah. And it is both reasonable and Christian to believe that God is affected by us.

This responsive love of God provides the ground of meaning for our existence. Our simplest actions, our most private thoughts can matter to us because they matter to God. They make an everlasting contribution to the world as preserved in God. No matter what happens in the future, even if our accomplishments seem to add up to nothing, our lives are meaningful because what we do matters to God. This includes our prayers.

Like the Hebrews whose conceptions of God's presence grew from the pillars of cloud and fire to the tent to the ark to the dynasty, our concepts are also inadequate to the reality of God. All of our language about God is necessarily symbolic. We can speak of God as Father, as Mother, as the Ground of Being, as the fellow-sufferer who understands, as the one who calls. But these are metaphors. If we make idols of any of our metaphors, we lock ourselves into one stage of spiritual growth. Assuming that we know more than we know may be necessary to some extent in the life of faith. But premature finality in describing God can choke and

smother true growth in the life of the spirit. Our pilgrimage of faith involves a dynamic relationship with God in which our limited and inadequate metaphors are in the process of being replaced by images that penetrate more deeply into the reality of God. The worship of God, says Whitehead, is an "adventure of the spirit."³⁵

³⁵Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, p. 192.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. What were your ideas about God when you were a child?
2. Which of these ideas do you still believe or hold in your feelings in spite of your adult beliefs?
3. What is important for you to believe about God before you can begin to pray?
4. What experiences in your life have caused you to expand your concept of God?
5. At what point in reading the material on thinking about God did you experience the most discomfort?
6. At any point, did you find yourself agreeing with your "heart", your feelings, as well as with your mind?
7. Were there any completely new ideas for you? any unanswered questions? any points that you would like to pursue?
8. What additions would you like to make to the list?

How Can You Think About God?

Several ways of thinking about God have been described in Session I. How does your image of God compare? Check the columns as indicated and use the space at the bottom of the sheet to add ways you would describe God not discussed in this material.

	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
1. God is a person.			
2. God is more than personal.			
3. God is Spirit.			
4. God is male.			
5. God is masculine.			
6. God is in heaven.			
7. God is immediately present to every place.			
8. God is present with us in every moment.			
9. God knows us better than we know ourselves.			
10. God is too busy for the ordinary cares and details of our lives.			
11. Truth can only be known from God's perspective.			
12. God is beyond the creation as well as within the creation.			
13. God is the ground of our unity with the rest of the creation.			
14. God is love.			

	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
15. God's love is an active benevolence that will go to any length to do good to the beloved object and to secure its well-being.			
16. God's love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.			
17. God offers us ideal possibilities for our existence.			
18. God uses the power of persuasion.			
19. God suffers with us.			
20. God judges us.			
21. God is like a critical parent.			
22. God forgives us.			
23. God is able to use what in the temporal world is mere wreckage.			
24. God is affected by what we do.			
25. All of our metaphors for God are inadequate.			

Look again at the items you have checked. Star the ones that make it possible for you to pray. Put an X by those that block you in prayer.

You may want to share your reactions and additions to this list with the person or group sharing this study with you.

If there are X's on the list that bother you, perhaps you could talk about these with your group, or your pastor, or a Christian friend. Check the bibliography for additional reading resources.

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS FOR WEEK TWO

I. PREPARATION AND CENTERING

II. MEDITATIVE READING OF THE SCRIPTURE

Day One: Matthew 6:9-13

Day Two: I Samuel 1:1-2:11

Day Three: Psalm 51:1-12

Day Four: Ephesians 3:14-19

Day Five: Matthew 6:1-8

Day Six: John 4:7-15

Day Seven: Jeremiah 31:31-34

III. PRAYERS

Adoration: Then sings my soul, my Savior God to
you, how great you are . . .

Confession: I have been less than the person you
created me to be. I have not loved you
with all of my heart, soul, mind or
strength, and I have not loved my neighbor
as myself, in these ways . . .

Forgive me and help me to be more open
to your direction in my life.

Thanksgiving: Counting my blessings makes me aware
of how much I have to thank you for
. . .

Petition: God, I want to ask you for these things
. . .

Help me to know what I really need, and
grant my requests as they fit in with
your care for the whole creation.

Intercession: I remember with you people like those
for whom you showed your concern in
the ministry of Jesus . . .

the poor, especially . . .

the sick, especially . . .

the troubled, especially . . .

Dedication: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; and
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born
to eternal life.

(Prayer of St. Francis)

IV. SILENCE

SESSION THREE: HOW CAN WE THINK ABOUT PRAYER?

Prayer is a "mysterious linking" of the human and the Divine," says Friedrich Heiler. It is "an incomprehensible wonder, a miracle of miracles."¹ It is a living communion between human beings and God, the bringing of our finite spirits into direct touch with the Infinite Spirit of God in a conscious and intentional way. This linking is made possible by God's initiative, by the working of the Spirit within us.

In this century we have experienced many marvelous developments in communication. We can pick up a telephone and talk directly to someone on the other side of the globe. The conversation flows back and forth almost as if we were in the same room. Human beings soar through space to the moon and carry on conversations with their colleagues back on earth with almost instantaneous communication. We see what is going on in other parts of the world televised live into our homes via satellite. It seems like a miracle.

Our ancestors in faith have experienced communication between the human spirit and God's Spirit for thousands of years. This "direct touch" has been taken for granted as far back in history as our Biblical record goes. Yet it too remains a source of wonder and amazement. It is

¹Friedrich Heiler, Prayer (London: Oxford University Press, 1932) p. 363.

to this miracle of miracles that we attempt now to give some careful thought. Assuming what has already been said about God, how can we think about prayer?

PRAYER AS OPENNESS

A key word in thinking about prayer is openness. God is always present with us, relating to us in every moment of our lives as creative and responsive love. But we are free to choose either to ignore or to give attention to that presence. Prayer is the act of being intentionally open to God.

Many persons and things are present to us every day. We are bombarded by an incredible number of messages and bits of information in the course of a day. There is no way that we could be consciously and intentionally open to all of them. We have to screen out many of the signals that come to us through our senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. We are not always free to choose what our environment will be, either internally or externally. But we do have some freedom of choice in deciding what our response to that environment will be. If I am walking in a beautiful park on a warm, spring day, I can choose to listen for bird songs and look for birds. Or I can choose to enjoy the beauty of color in the new leaves and the flowers against the darker green of the grass and the blue of the sky. Or I can be absorbed in analyzing a painful disagreement with

someone important to me, and not be consciously aware of the birds or the colors at all. Likewise, in a crowded restaurant, it is possible for me to keep up with a boring conversation at my table while listening in on a more interesting conversation at the next table! We do have power in deciding to what we will consciously pay attention.

God is a constant part of our environment. We can ignore that presence. We also can open ourselves to communion with that presence. To do so is to pray.

Prayer involves two kinds of openness: openness to God and openness with God.

Some of the leaders of the Christian church in the second and third centuries after Christ used the Greek word "homilia" or its root form "homilein" for prayer. This word can mean being or living together, conversing or dealing with one another, encountering, being friends.² Prayer is in some ways like a human social relationship or friendship. In friendship, we are open to the other person. We listen, respect, and try to understand the other person. We try to see things from her or his perspective. We are also open with a friend. We share ourselves honestly. We reveal

²Robert L. Simpson, The Interpretation of Prayer in the Early Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965) p. 133. "homilia" in A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell & Scott's Greek-English Lexicon (New York: Harper & Brothers 1899) p. 486.

what it is like to be who we are. We tell what is going on in our world. In prayer we are open to who God is and what God's truth and purposes are. And we tell God who we are and what we need and desire.

Jesus gave his disciples a model for prayer that reflected this two-dimensional openness. In the Lord's prayer, there are six major petitions. In the first three, attention is focussed on God.

Our Father, who are in heaven,
Hallowed by thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt. 6:9-10)

The one who prays is open to who God is, expresses respect for God's Being, and shares in wanting what God wants for the world. The prayer begins with a response to God from the mind, the emotions, the will of the one who prays. The second three petitions make known the requests of the disciples who pray.

Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil. (Mt 6:11-13)

Our physical needs, our relationships, the struggles of our existence--the whole of our life is appropriately shared openly with God.

Perhaps our thinking about prayer can be helped by a more careful look at the two sides of our participation in this "mysterious linking" called prayer.

A. Openness to God

One popular definition of prayer describes it as "a time exposure of the soul to God." When film is exposed it is changed. It acquires a likeness to that to which it has been exposed. When we become open to God in prayer, we grant to God power to shape and transform us in the relationship. John Cobb speaks of the divine "field of force."³ When we open ourselves to God in prayer we put ourselves in that field of force. Like metal filings in a field of force of a powerful magnet, we will find ourselves attracted and creatively transformed. When we open ourselves to God we give power to God's call forward to the vast possibilities that God offers to us.

A popular old gospel hymn of the church expresses this openness to God.

I need thee every hour;
Teach me thy will;
And thy rich promises
In me fulfill.⁴

Peter Annet, an old Deist, is quoted as saying that praying people are "like sailors who have cast anchor on a rock, and who imagine they are pulling the rock to themselves, when they are really pulling themselves to the

³John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Griffin, Process Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) p. 106.

⁴Annie S. Hawks (1835-1918), "I Need Thee Every Hour" in The Book of Hymns, #265, stanza 1.

rock."⁵ Christlikeness, or Christian maturity, is the goal toward which we will be drawn if we open ourselves to God in prayer. Another of Samuel Longfellow's hymns invites this transformation.

Holy Spirit, Truth Divine,
Dawn upon this soul of mine;
Word of God and inward light,
Wake my spirit, clear my sight.

Holy Spirit, Love divine,
Glow within this heart of mine;
Kindle every high desire;
Perish self in thy pure fire.

Holy Spirit, Power divine,
Fill and nerve this will of mine;
By thee may I strongly live,
Bravely bear and nobly strive.

Holy Spirit, Right divine,
King within my conscience reign;
Be my Lord, and I shall be
Firmly bound, forever free.⁶

When we open ourselves to God in prayer, we leave our private, enclosed worlds and enter a broader, shared world. We lift our eyes from our limited self-interest to look at reality from the perspective of God. Our inner world becomes connected to universality.

When we open ourselves to God in prayer, we make a way for the work of God's creative love in our lives.

B. Openness with God

⁵Fosdick, p. 153.

⁶Samuel Longfellow (1819-1892) "Holy Spirit, Truth Divine" in The Book of Hymns, #135.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, in his popular book on prayer, points out that prayer is the "personal appropriation of faith that God cares for each of us."⁷ "Belief by itself," he says, "is a map of the unvisited land of God's care; prayer is actually traveling the country."⁸ Prayer is an expression of faith in God's responsive love as well.

The Christian scriptures contain an abundance of models of honest, open self-revelation in prayer. Ezra leads his people in confession:

O God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face
to thee, my God, for our iniquities have risen
higher than our heads, and our guilt has
mounted up to the heavens (Ezra 9:6)

Jeremiah complains about the way God is treating him. He accuses God of being to him "like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail." (Jer 15:18) Jonah expresses his anger to God in a prayer to die. (Jonah 4:1-3) The Psalms are full of expressions of the full range of human conditions shared with God in rich detail and extravagant imagery.

For evils have encompassed me without number;
my iniquities have overtaken me till I cannot see;
they are more than the hairs of my head;
my heart fails me. (Psalm 40:12)

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief,
my soul and my body also.
For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing. (Psalm 31:9-10a)

⁷Fosdick, p. 50.

⁸Ibid.

My soul longs, yea, faints
for the courts of the Lord;
My heart and flesh sing for joy
to the living God. (Psalm 84:2)

Personal needs and desires are expressed, and there is intercession for other people in need. There are prayers to be saved from one's problems and enemies. There are prayers for healing of both mental and physical ills. Sometimes there is a kind of struggle of wills between the human desire and the divine purpose. Self-revelation becomes encounter and confrontation. Prayer in the Bible on occasion is more honest than polite.

And the assumption in the openness with God in scripture is that not only are we affected by God in prayer, but that our prayers make a difference to God. In the New Testament, the author of James says, "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects." (James 5:16) Since the prayer is directed to God, one could assume that the prayer affects God.

One of the striking and consistent characteristics of Biblical prayer is its honesty. One of the most serious blocks to prayer is dishonesty, or role-playing with God. All of us play roles. We may fill the role of secretary to a boss, dentist to a patient, parent to a child, spouse to a husband or wife. And all of us wear masks. They are necessary in our social relationships. But in prayer, roles can be abandoned and masks put aside. God knows the true self

better than we even know ourselves. We do not need to play the saint with God, saying all of the right things. We do not need to pretend or hide. Prayer is a matter of honest communication between a genuine "I" and a "Thou" who knows us intimately, loves us unconditionally (even when we role-play!), and hears us in a way that makes a difference.

Prayer as such open and honest communication is often described as a matter of the heart. Our deepest concerns are appropriately revealed to God in prayer.

THE HEART AS THE LOCUS OF PRAYER

There is a second way in which prayer may be thought of as a matter of the heart . . . In scripture, the "heart" is "the central and unifying organ of personal life"⁹--the core of our being. Thomas Merton defines the "heart" as "the root and source of all one's own inner truth."¹⁰ It is the place where we most are who we are, where we know who we are.

In Hebrew thought, this was the part of the human being through which contact was made with the divine. Human-divine transactions took place in the heart. God worked there to transform character.

⁹R. C. Dentan, "Heart" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, II, 49.

¹⁰Thomas Merton, Contemplative Prayer (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) p. 21.

But this is the covenant which I will make
with the house of Israel after those days,
says the Lord: I will put my law within them,
and I will write it upon their hearts; and I
will be their God and they shall be my
people. (Jeremiah 31:33)

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
(Psalm 51:10)

God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit which has been
given to us. (Romans 5:5)

. . . that Christ may dwell in your hearts
through faith . . . (Ephesians 3:17)

Since the heart or core of our being is where God
meets us and works with us, then the heart is the place
where prayer occurs.

Our twentieth century minds are more used to loca-
ting the center of personality in the brain. We talk about
the rational, analytical functions of the left brain, and
the emotional, intuitive functions of the right brain. To
translate the idea of the heart as the center of our per-
sonality, it is probably necessary to think of the whole
brain, not only the right and left, but the conscious and
subconscious as well.

The Eastern Orthodox branch of the church has a
tradition of speaking of three interpenetrating levels of
prayer: the prayer of the lips, the prayer of the mind,
and the prayer of the heart, or of the mind in the heart.
Prayer may be a matter of the lips, but it needs to include
also the mind, and the center of our being, the place where

we most are who we are.

In prayer, one turns inward to find God. One turns one's attention inward to what the Quaker Thomas Kelly calls "the sanctuary of the soul."¹¹ St. Theresa of Avila repeatedly returned to this theme in her spiritual direction. "The Lord is within us," she said. "The soul collects together all the faculties and enters within itself to be with its God."¹² This is not just the perception of the Quakers and the saints. Even the great prophet of the social gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, witnessed to this experience of finding God in the center of his being.

In the castle of my soul
Is a little garden gate
Whereat, when I enter
I am in the presence of God.
In a moment, in the turning of a thought,
I am where God is,
That is a fact . . .¹³

This is not to say that we possess God, or that all of God is inside us. Rather it is to say that God is present in the center of our being, and that we can encounter the divine spirit there. Fosdick, with his genius for analogy, gives a picture of how God is close to us and yet

¹¹Thomas Kelly, A Testament of Devotion (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941) p. 29.

¹²Theresa of Avila, The Way of Perfection (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) p. 185.

¹³Walter Rauschenbusch, "The Little Gate to God" in his A Rauschenbusch Reader (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 148.

far beyond.

Each time I visit my island off the coast of Maine, I fall in love with the sea again. Now I don't know all of the sea--wide areas of it are unknown to me--but I know the sea. It has a near range. It washes my island. I can sit beside it . . . and sail over it, and be sung to sleep by the music of it. God is like that. He is so great in His vastness that we can only think of him in symbolic terms, but he has a near range.¹⁴

THE FORMS OF PRAYER

Communion with God in prayer takes many forms in the Christian tradition. Words and verbal forms of communication are used in most public worship, although the Society of Friends, or Quakers, are well known for their silent meetings. Prayers in public worship may be strictly prescribed in a standard liturgy, written fresh for each service of worship, or created spontaneously in the service, or a combination of these forms depending on the traditions and customs of a worshipping community. Some people pray in tongues, others chant or use mantras. Prayers can be sung. But prayer without words is possible too. Prayer can take the form of thought or creative visualization or the more passive quiet contemplation. In individual prayer, the beginner may find the use of words necessary. As with a new acquaintance, silence may be awkward. Even words may be

¹⁴Harry Emerson Fosdick in Max Link, Breakaway (Allen, TX: Argus Communications, 1980) p. 54.

awkward. P. T. Forsyth finds that "words fail us in prayer oftener than anywhere else."¹⁵ But as the relationship of prayer develops and matures, the number of words may decline. As it is possible to simply be together in silence with an intimate friend, so it is possible to be silent in prayer.

Prayer is not a special privilege reserved for people who are good with words. How perfectly or imperfectly a person speaks is unimportant in personal prayer. God can hear the profound meanings in our simplest words, and behind them knows our minds (and hearts!)

The story is told of a simple peasant who regularly spent an hour each day sitting in the front row of a small Catholic chapel in his town. One day the priest met him as he left, and made so bold as to ask him what he did each day in the chapel. He pointed to the crucifix hanging over the altar before which he sat and said, "I just look at him and he looks at me."

As prayer can be both verbal and non-verbal, it can also be both public and private, or corporate and individual. In fact, it is important for the prayer life of the Christian to have both individual and corporate dimensions. We are to pray both in our room with the door shut where our Father who "sees in secret" (Mt 6:6) will reward us, and in groups gathered together in Christ's name where his presence is in

¹⁵P. T. Forsyth, The Soul of Prayer (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1916) p. 21.

the midst of us. (Mt 18:20)

Kenneth Leech uses the words "solitude" and "solidarity" to describe these two settings for prayer and he points out that they are "inseparably linked."¹⁶ Each is complementary to the other. As Christians we are called to join with the church in common worship and prayer. We need to share in listening for God's word to the church and to join in the prayers of the community. We need prayer in solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters. There, as Evelyn Underhill points out, "we are released from a narrow selfish outlook on the universe by a common act of worship."¹⁷ But public worship can become empty ritual or impersonal form. Prayer in solitude can help sensitize the worshipper to the significance of the liturgy and increase personal involvement in what happens there. Prayer in solitude provides the opportunity for interacting with God about the unique business of our own lives. But private prayer needs the guidance and inspiration of common prayer. And a person who prays only alone is in danger of drifting into individualistic piety that is something other than Christian faith. Participation in both public and private prayer is essential for wholeness in the experience of Christian prayer.

¹⁶Leech, p. 85.

¹⁷Evelyn Underhill, Collected Papers of Evelyn Underhill (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1946) p. 78.

But whether we pray in the privacy of our room or in community, we are praying as the church. We may pray in solitude, but not in isolation. For those who pray in Christ's name, pray as a part of God's people in Christ. In that sense, all prayer, even the prayer of the hermit in the desert or the invalid in the nursing home can be corporate prayer.

There is no such thing as a purely private relationship between a single human being and the "person" of God. For we come as part of Christ's church. We encounter in God our inter-connectedness with all that is.

PRAYER IN THE VISION OF GOD

Finally, it is important to note the place of prayer in the vision or purpose of God. John Magee calls prayer as a relationship of communion with God "the Kingdom in embryo."¹⁸ Jesus' summary of the law in the Great Commandment begins with the commandment to love God with our whole being. A conscious, intentional relationship with God in prayer is one of the ways this love is expressed and nurtured. Even in our simplest and most elementary prayers, we are doing the will of God.

Prayer is one of the means of grace. God can work in our lives through the prayer relationship in healing,

¹⁸Magee, p. 43.

wholemaking, saving ways. Prayer is not a human enterprise. God comes to us. God's spirit works in us offering this mysterious linking of the Divine Spirit with our spirits, making possible this communion of Heart with heart. Our part is but to respond to the divine gift. This communion is one of the ways we are called forward to our full humanity and invited to be what Peter calls "partakers of divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4)

Quoting Dr. Fosdick once again: "The gospel offers a great privilege; prayer appropriates it."¹⁹

¹⁹Fosdick, p. 51.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. How do your ideas about prayer differ from those presented here?
2. Were there some new ideas here that you found yourself tentatively agreeing with?
3. Where do you locate the core of your personhood? Can you think of God as present and communicating with you there?
4. Think back to times when you were aware of praying from your heart. What form did the prayer take? Was it verbal or non-verbal, public or private?
5. In what ways have you experienced prayer as healing, whole-making, saving?

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS FOR WEEK THREE

I. PREPARATION AND CENTERING

II. MEDITATIVE READING OF THE SCRIPTURE

Day One: Psalm 8

Day Two: Psalm 103:1-5

Day Three: Psalm 103:6-14

Day Four: Luke 1:46-55

Day Five: Matthew 18:1-6

Day Six: Matthew 7:25-30

Day Seven: Isaiah 40:27-31

III. PRAYERS

Adoration: Joyful, joyful, I adore you,
God of glory and of love . . .

Confession: All have sinned and fallen short of your
glory. This is true for me today in
these ways . . .

Thanksgiving: The Almighty has done great things for
me . . .

Petition: I need your help . . .

Intercession: I remember members of my family and
those who are closest to me, asking
that they may be showered with your
blessings . . .

Dedication: Here am I. Send me!

IV. SILENCE

SESSION FOUR: HOW CAN WE PRAY?

PREPARATION AND CENTERING

"Be still and know that I am God," an admonition from the Psalms (46:10), gives us a good starting place for prayer. "Be still!" responds a chorus of voices, "with all I have to do?" That may have been possible for a wandering people camping in the desert at night, or for village folk in ancient Palestine. Life was simpler in those days. But in the twentieth century rat-race, that's easier said than done!"

Rufus Jones, a Quaker writer, points to the problem of finding time to be still as a major block to the kind of prayer that makes a difference.

Hush, waiting, meditation, concentration of spirit, are just the reverse of our busy, driving, modern temper. The person who meditates, we are apt to think, will lose an opportunity to do something; while he muses, the procession will go on and leave him behind.¹

Stillness is not essential to prayer. We can pray in the middle of noise and confusion. But the experience of the church across the centuries has been that "being still" is helpful in enhancing awareness of the presence of God. Finding or making time to pray is a first and major step.

¹Rufus Jones in his Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time (New York: Macmillan, 1954) p. 166.

Regular participation in congregational worship provides a disciplined structure for prayer, and gives a framework in which the personal devotional life can be set. A small group in which people share the prayer experience and hold each other accountable for personal spiritual disciplines can provide valuable support and encouragement. The consistent use of a devotional periodical at a set time each day is a pattern used by millions, if sales of such materials are any indication. The setting of time and place for prayer is a personal matter, and not surprisingly, for many people this is a major hurdle.

Whatever the time and place, it is usually a good idea to spend the first few minutes of a time of prayer in collecting the mind, relaxing the body and surrendering the spirit to openness in prayer.

The purpose of being still is in order to know that God is God, to be aware of God's presence with us.

Rufus Jones tells a story of a group of children on an island just off the coast. A visitor decided to have a summer Sunday School for the children. The island was so tiny that the ocean could be seen from every part of it. The children could hear the sound of the surf from the time they woke in the morning until they went to sleep at night. They could smell the salty sea air with every breath. Most of the protein in their diet came from the ocean. They had sailed across its surface in their father's boats, and they had

played in its waves on the beaches. The teacher gathered the children for the first lesson. Beginning with the familiar, the teacher asked, "How many of you have seen the Atlantic Ocean?" The children did not respond. They looked at the teacher blankly, not knowing what he was talking about. The Atlantic Ocean was their constant environment. But nobody had ever named it or interpreted it to them.²

This is a parable of our life, says Jones. God is a constant part of our environment. Prayer begins with conscious openness to that presence. It is as if we are sharing a room or a car with someone else. Our attention may be on other things. But we suddenly realize the other is there. "Oh yes, you are here too!" And communication with that other then begins to be the center of our attention. Because God is present with us as "Spirit", not as another body, being in touch with our own spirit, centering, being quiet helps us to be aware, "Oh yes, you are here too!"

MEDITATIVE READING OF SCRIPTURE

Meditation about God can help us to attend to the presence of God with us. Meditative reading of scripture is a primary resource. The Bible records encounters between

²Ibid., p. 3.

people and God over a period of nearly fifteen hundred years. God is revealed to us through the reports of the men and women whose stories are preserved for us there. God's nature and intentions are most clearly revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Meditating on scripture is an important part of being open to God.

Meditating on scripture, however, is different from looking at a work of art where the artist says, "It can mean whatever you want it to mean." What is said there has come from a variety of sources, spoken, written or sung in a variety of literary forms for a variety of purposes. The contents of the Bible have been used and shaped over the centuries by a community of faith for worship and instruction. Scholars in recent years have pointed to the value of understanding the setting and the literary form and the function of a particular passage in order to get at its original meaning. Much new light has been thrown on scripture by this scholarly analysis. Some exciting discoveries have been made. One negative effect of this critical approach to scripture, however, has been the intimidation of many people who are not scholars from coming directly to the Bible for their own personal devotional life. The Bible, however, does not need to be taken away from the general populace and given over to the private custody of the scholars. The Christian in the pew does not need to be

required to read scripture through lenses provided by Bible scholars.³

Many of the passages, themes, and forms that had one meaning when used originally in scripture reappear later with a new meaning and application. The New Testament includes an abundance of quotes and references from the Old Testament. Frequently a brand new meaning is given to the old words. In our historical context, we do not need to be strictly limited to the original meaning of passages of scripture in our understanding and interpretation of them. The original message is not the only message that it is legitimate for us to hear.

However, unscholarly Christians do need to be alert to the danger of misusing scriptural materials. Narrow minded literalism that ignores both cultural context and literary form and canonical themes can produce misinterpretations that violate the central thrusts of the Bible. Individual passages can be read to say what we want them to say.

³James Sanders sums up the situation as follows: "One of the charges being leveled with increasing frequency at the guild of biblical criticism is that we have locked the Bible into the past. Protestantism may have cut the chains which had bound the Bible to the church lectern, but it proceeded to sponsor, at least to some degree, enlightenment study of the Bible which seemed in turn to chain the Bible to the scholar's desk." James A. Sanders, "Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism," Horizons in Biblical Theology, II (1980) 175.

James Sanders suggests that each passage should be read in light of some overall Biblical agreements about God:

God is creator, elector, sustainer, judge, redeemer, and re-creator. And no passage should be read, or applied by the present reader without that affirmation clearly in mind.⁴

No complete and final set of guidelines for devotional use of scripture guaranteed to protect the reader from all error has yet been developed. While we wait for such help, the Holy Spirit can continue to speak to us directly through scripture. We can test our interpretations against the traditions of the Christian community, our reason, and our personal experience if we have questions about what we are hearing there. And we have the gifts of interpretation provided by modern scholarship, a great deal of which is easily accessible to lay people.

Another rich resource for meditation is the wide range of translations of the Bible available to us today. The King James version continues to be published for those who resonate to the poetic beauty of the language. A variety of translations into today's English can provide fresh insights by saying the same things with different words. Having more than one translation on hand can be stimulating to the imagination in the process of meditation

⁴Ibid., p. 180.

or listening to God through scripture.

In meditating about God with scripture, two questions may be helpful. Ask: "What does this passage tell me about God?" and "What does this tell me about the possibilities toward which God is calling all of the creation, including me?"

Such thinking about God and listening for God's word can lead naturally to prayer or communion with God.

ADORATION AND PRAISE

The traditional starting place for our response to the presence of God is adoration or praise. This is a crucial but frequently neglected part of prayer. Since our need for God is what drives us to prayer, it is easy to plunge immediately into the pouring out of our needs and desires. But the first petition of our model prayer is "Hallowed be thy name" with good reason. In adoration and praise, we acknowledge that we have some sense of who it is with whom we have communion, and we rejoice in and celebrate the relationship for itself.

James Sanders finds that sin in the Old Testament can be understood as the confusing of the gifts with the Giver. We make gods of the gifts of life, and we forget the Giver. We worship the things God provides and neglect God. What God wants, Sanders says, is a big hug. But we are too busy hugging God's gifts.

In praise and adoration, we respond to who God is with our rejoicing, by loving God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. As in any other relationship, if this is taken for granted, something of indescribable importance is lost.

Expressing our praise to God may be awkward at first. We may find ourselves at a loss for words. Bare prose hardly seems adequate for the job. What do you say? Much of the praise and adoration in our tradition is in the form of poetry and song, found in the book of Psalms and in our hymn-books. Our praise to God can be stimulated by reading and reflecting on the praise of others.

Our praise need not be eloquent. C. S. Lewis recounts a day when the language for praise was no longer a problem.

You first taught me the great principle (of adoration). "Begin where you are." I had thought one had to start by summoning up what we believe about the goodness and greatness of God, by thinking about creation and redemption and 'all the blessings of this life.' You turned to the brook and once more splashed your burning face and hands in the little waterfall and said, "Why not begin with this?"

And it worked . . . That cushiony moss, that coldness and sound and dancing light were no doubt very minor blessings compared with 'the means of grace and the hope of glory'. But then, they were manifest. So far as they were concerned, sight had replaced faith. They were not the hope of glory, they were an exposition of the glory itself.⁵

CONFESSION

⁵C. S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963) p. 88.

A second way in which we can pray is confession. Isaiah reports on his vision of God in the temple as a young man. He sees God "high and lifted up," (Isa 6:1) Around God is a chorus who sing,

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory. (Isa 6:3)

Isaiah's response to this vision of a holy God is an overwhelming sense of his own unholiness:

And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

The vision continues. One of the beings surrounding God comes to Isaiah with a burning coal "which he had taken with tongs from the altar." (Isa 6:6)

And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven," (Isa 6:7)

For centuries, people have seen in Isaiah's vision their own experience. In God's presence, their own imperfections have become keenly perceived. Confession to God in the spirit of repentance brings almost instantaneous awareness of God's forgiveness, with a liberating effect, a freeing for new life. Isaiah discovered himself to be now fit for God's service:

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

Echoes of Isaiah's experience can be heard in this early twentieth century hymn:

Dear Master, in whose life I see
 All that I would, but fail to be,
 Let thy clear light forever shine,
 To shame and guide this life of mine.

Though what I dream and what I do
 In my weak days are always two,
 Help me, oppressed by things undone,
 O thou, whose deeds and dreams are one!⁶

In God's presence we can come to know the truth about ourselves. If we are willing to be open and honest in prayer, to take off masks, and put aside roles and reveal ourselves to the One who already knows us and yet loves us, then we can know the truth about ourselves.

Part of the truth about ourselves will be painful and unpleasant. In every life there will be unfinished business about which there may be some guilt. There will be behavior patterns that we regret. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," says Paul (Rom 3:23) And the author of I John asserts:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:8-9)

Mother Theresa of Calcutta, perhaps one of the most Christ-like figures of our century, goes regularly to confession. An interviewer, aware that she will probably be canonized as a saint by her church at her death, asks why. "I am a human being, and a sinner," she responds, "and so I

⁶ John Hunter (1848-1917) "Dear Master, in Whose Life I See" in The Book of Hymns, #254.

need to go to confession regularly."

Twentieth century psychologists, notably the psychiatrist Karen Horney, have described a human defense against dealing honestly with the painful and unpleasant parts of our real selves. We create, they say, a kind of false self, an idealized image of ourself. Because we cannot truly escape the true self, we end up with two selves to support, and a lack of integration in who we are.

God's transactions are with the real self. In confessional prayer, we can surrender the defensive ego and confess to being who we are. We might well come to confession with the words of the hymn:

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth thou has for me;
Place in my hand the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth thou sendest clear;
And while the wave-notes fall on my ear,
Everything false will disappear.

Silently now I wait for thee,
Ready, my God thy will to see,
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!

Unfinished business from the past in the form of offenses and omissions for which we must assume some responsibility can burden us down in the present. Repressing feelings of guilt just makes a bad matter worse. Denying

⁷Clara H. Scott (1841-1897), "Open My Eyes, That I May See" in The Book of Hymns, #267, stanzas 1 & 2.

our share of the responsibility in an alienated relationship, our contribution to a destructive situation is denying who we really are. Since God knows what we want to deny, such efforts to escape our own reality cut us off not only from ourselves, but also from openness with God. Thomas Merton speaks of the "sense of loss, forsakenness and abandonment by God"⁸ that a person can experience when acting in contradiction to one's true condition.

The prayer of confession is a means to reconciliation. When we are willing to be open to our own truth, with the will to change our ways and to make amends, God's forgiveness can set us free. Remember again the story of the prodigal son, and listen to the words of Psalm 103.

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
 He will not always chide,
 nor will he keep his anger forever.
 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
 nor requite us according to our iniquities.
 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
 so great is his steadfast love toward them that
 fear him;
 as far as the east is from the west,
 so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
 (Psalm 103:8-12)

How shall we make our confession? Alcoholics Anonymous has discovered the central importance of confession in the process of recovering from alcoholism. In their "Twelve Steps" program, seven of the steps have to do with getting in touch with one's own reality through confession.

⁸Merton, p. 96.

Their experience reflects the broad Christian tradition. Following the acknowledgement of total dependence on God, they say:

We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves;

admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs;

were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character;

humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings;

made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all;

made direct amends to such people, wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others;

continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.⁹

Self-searching ideally becomes a regular habit, in the supportive community of an Alcoholics Anonymous group.

Confession to God needs to include our participation in corporate sins, as institutional racism and pollution of the environment, as well as our unique, individual experience.

Confession does not need to be a matter of wallowing in guilt or of self-flagellation. Confession can be thought of as a way of getting in touch with the growing edges of our Christian pilgrimage. It is a matter of acknowledging

⁹Alcoholics Anonymous, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1952) pp. 6-8.

our reality to God who already knows and who accepts us as we really are. Once we have confessed and repented, we can leave what has been to God, who then synthesizes and preserves what can be saved, and offers us new possibilities appropriate to where we are.

The more difficult part may be forgiving ourselves. When guilt continues to burden down the spirit, some other problem may be involved. Guilt that is not relieved by confession and repentance may be neurotic guilt. Counseling or therapy may be necessary to get at its roots and to facilitate its release. Confessing to another person who can be trusted can help to sort out the problem. The A.A. system of sponsors and the Roman Catholic sacrament of confession testify to the value of working through guilt in dialogue with another person.

God's healing, whole-making, saving power can be at work in us in our prayers of confession and repentance. Like Isaiah, we can be set free to redirect our energies in more constructive directions. The author of James says:

Therefore confess your sins to one another and
pray for one another that you may be healed.
(James 5:16)

As we praise and confess to God in prayer, we are turning toward reality--the reality that heals. In praise we open ourselves to God's reality, in confession to our own reality.

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee,
 God of glory, Lord of love;
 Hearts unfold like flowers before thee,
 Opening to the sun above.
 Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
 Drive the dark of doubt away;
 Giver of immortal gladness,
 Fill us with the light of day!¹⁰

THANKSGIVING

A third way in which we can pray is thanksgiving. It is appropriate to thank the Giver for the gifts. Praise and thanksgiving are sometimes difficult to distinguish from each other. Praise is our response to the being and presence of God, thanksgiving is our response to God's gifts. But it is possible that we can praise God for goodness and love revealed in gifts, while thanking God for the gift of presence.

Biblical prayers of thanksgiving mention the gifts of creation, provisions for our human needs, and God's saving work in our midst, especially God's love. (I Chron 16:7-36; Psalms 30 and 106)

Jesus gave thanks as he broke the bread and shared the cup with his disciples. Paul gave thanks to God for "the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor 15:57) and for God's "inexpressible gift". (2 Cor 9:15) He also repeatedly gave thanks to God for the gift of his sisters

¹⁰ Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933), "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" in The Book of Hymns, #38, stanza 1.

and brothers in the faith.

Thanksgiving to God is properly a part of our solitary worship as well.

Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom this world rejoices;
Who, from our mothers' arms,
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.¹¹

PETITION

A fourth way that we can pray is to tell God what we want and need. In the popular mind, that is a complete and adequate definition of prayer. In fact, prayer is sometimes regarded as nothing more than a twentieth century form of primitive magic. In a television interview, a coach is asked what he plans to do to prepare for a game in which the odds are against him three to one. He answers, "Pray a lot!" A cartoon features two fish in a fish bowl over which is crouched a menacing cat. Eyeing a nearby telephone, one fish suggests, "Let's try Dial-a-Prayer!" On the golf course, a minister gets a fortuitous lay for his ball. His golfing partner challenges, "Don't tell me you haven't been praying!"

The desire to manipulate divine powers to human ends

¹¹Martin Rinkart (1586-1649), "Now Thank We All Our God" in The Book of Hymns, #49, stanza 1.

is characteristic of the most primitive of human religions. Much early religious form and ritual was an attempt to control the powers beyond human understanding to serve human purposes. Vestiges of this attitude are still with us.

Christian petition differs from magic in one major way. In Christian prayer, the goal is to communicate with God rather than to manipulate God. The individual's will is asserted and expressed in order that it can be negotiated and harmonized with God's vision and purpose. In Christian prayer we tell God what we think we want and need. But these petitions are set in the context of a commitment to God. Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done" before he prayed "Give us this day our daily bread." In Gethsemane, he qualified his agonized plea "Let this cup pass from me" with "thy will be done." (Mt 26:42)

P. T. Forsyth warns against the danger of letting our prayer be simply a total passivity before the will of God. Accepting a situation too quickly as God's will may be more a sign of weakness or immaturity than of faith and trust. Prayer is a matter of encounter of wills. Assertiveness is not a brand new value. In the parable of the woman who besieged an unjust judge, Jesus urged insistence in prayer (MT 18:1-6) In Matthew's words, "he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not to lose heart." The Syrophoenician woman, by her assertiveness convinced Jesus to change his mind and grant her request

to free her daughter from a demon. (Mk 7:25-30) To the woman with the issue of blood who touched his robe from behind in order to be healed, Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace." (Lk 8:48) If we do not assert our will, it may be that God will not be able to offer us possibilities that would be available to us if we expressed our strength and will.

Forsyth also warns against being too timid in our prayers, too cautious in what we consider permissible subjects for petition. "Take everything to [God] that exercises you," he says.¹² Speaking of the intimate nature of our communion with God, he says:

. . . faith means confidence between you [and God], and not only favours. And there is not confidence if you keep back what is hot or heavy on your heart.¹³

Hot and heavy on the hearts of our Old Testament ancestors often were strong negative feelings, doubts, fears, grief, frustration, resentment, even anger toward God. There is no reason why this cannot be true for us. Being open with God in prayer will include dealing honestly with the issues of our lives, the things we are working on at what are the growing edges of our lives. All of that may not be pleasant to hear! But what close relationship is all sweetness and light?

¹²Forsyth, p. 97.

¹³Ibid.

Georgia Harkness joins P. T. Forsyth in encouraging boldness in prayer.

Where there is any deep-seated need, it is fitting that such need be expressed before God in prayer.¹⁴

There is no need to limit the categories for our petitions. Many of the great prayers of the Christian church deal with requests for spiritual blessings, like the collect for purity:

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

But needs in all dimensions of our lives are objects of God's concern. We can pray for what we need physically, mentally, socially, spiritually, whatever. If we are uncertain about the limits beyond which God does not go, Dr. Harkness counsels: "the best course is to pray in humble trust and leave with God the boundaries of possibility."¹⁵

She does add one pertinent word of warning to her encouragement to be bold in prayer. Prayer is misused when we think of it as a way to evade responsibility.

It is not legitimate to pray for food, clothing, shelter, money for an education or a home, success in one's vocation, or any other material pursuit, and do nothing further about it.¹⁶

¹⁴Georgia E. Harkness, Prayer and the Common Life (New York: Abingdon Press, 1948) p. 67.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 67.

But timidity and caution are the enemies of meaningful prayer.

We can expect that our petitions will be changed in the process of prayer about them. Our wishes and desires may well be clarified, purified, and matured. In the process of making our needs known to God, it may be helpful to ask: Is there a deeper need behind my request? What is it that I really want? The prayer itself may change several times in the process of being prayed before it comes to the place where it can be answered in the context of God's broader vision. The starting place is "confidences", expecting purification in the process of praying rather than trying to do the screening before beginning to pray.

When we pray we can trust the answers to God. God hears and takes account of our prayers. The answer may not be exactly what we asked, but God can be trusted to answer. And the answer can be expected to be consistent with God's overall creative and redemptive purposes.

Creative visualization is an increasingly popular way to pray for one's own needs. Instead of simply rehashing the problem or lamenting the situation, visualizing the ideal solution or the desired outcome can clarify the real need. Such positive imaging can sometimes help the one who prays to see ways to be the answer to one's own prayers. Psycho-cybernetics points to the power of such positive thinking in mobilizing the forces of our personality in our

own interest. But positive visualization in prayer is more than auto-suggestion. It is a way of clearly communicating with God what it is that we need.

INTERCESSION

Creative visualization can also be helpful in a fifth way that we can pray. It can be used as a way to pray for others.

Praying for others is one of the ways we can love our neighbors as ourselves. We can express love by giving to other people, by respecting their human dignity, by protesting and resisting those things that are destructive to human welfare, by ministering to human needs and working for better social conditions, by simple thoughtfulness and consideration. We can also love our neighbors, our human sisters and brothers, by praying for them.

Prayer for each other is made possible by faith that we are all inter-connected with each other in our mutual relationship with a God whose nature is love. It seems that physicists and philosophers and mystics are all talking about the organismic unity of reality. Twentieth century physics has revealed to us a physical reality of interconnectedness in the universe. No person or thing is an island of independence. The distant moon affects the tides. A tiny virus triggers an international epidemic. One overloaded electric transformer throws a whole section of a nation into darkness.

Every particle of energy is a part of a field of force that is in turn related to larger and larger fields of force through the universe. Everything each of us does affects the rest of reality. Every part of reality is related to every other part of reality in the universe.

Evelyn Underhill relates this to prayer:

The whole possibility of intercessory prayer seems based on this truth of spiritual communion--the fact that we are not separate little units but deeply interconnected--so that all we do, feel and endure has a secret effect radiating far beyond ourselves.¹⁷

From a philosopher's point-of-view, Alfred North Whitehead shows that there is no philosophical reason why there cannot be a psychic field of force in reality along with the electromagnetic fields of force which science has so effectively identified and learned to use. There may well be channels of communication through which our active benevolence shared with God in prayer can also directly contribute to the well-being of those for whom we pray.¹⁸

God is related to all of the interconnected parts of the creation. God is the binding element in the world. (See Session II) God's relationship to all of this creation is expressed as creative-responsive love--active benevolence that will go to any length to do good to the beloved object

¹⁷Underhill, p. 56.

¹⁸Whitehead, Process and Reality, pp. 307-308.

and to secure its well-being--a relationship of devotion, loyalty, intimate knowledge and responsibility.

God's love, which makes prayer for ourselves possible, is equally given to the people we love. God's love is given to the people who are like us, and to the people who are different from us. It is given to those who are unattractive to us and to those who threaten us, to our enemies. God's care extends to the sparrows and the lillies of the field, to the trees and the stones, to the atoms and to the quarks and to the photons. Our neighbor can be understood to be the whole of creation. We are interconnected in God's love with all of the rest of reality.

When we pray for others, we join our psychic energy, our hearts to the love of God in active benevolence. How this "works" remains a mystery. But with Archbishop William Temple, countless Christians have been able to affirm, "When I pray, coincidences happen, when I don't, they don't!"

At the least, in our prayers of intercession for others, we open ourselves to God's love for them. In so doing, we create the possibility of change in our attitudes toward them, and we make ourselves available as the instruments of God's love in their lives. In addition, we contribute our resources to the supply of love and caring in the world.

Praying for someone else can give direction to our efforts on their behalf. As we share our concern for them,

we may receive new insight into what we can do. Our sensitivity may be enhanced, and our motivation strengthened. Sometimes intercessory praying is all that we can do. We can do that in faith that in cooperation with God's creative and healing love, forces are being released in ways that are beyond our understanding.

Intercession is not just to be for those for whom we feel natural love. "Love your enemies," said Jesus, "do good to those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

(Lk 6:27-28) He modeled this as he prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

(Lk 23:24) By looking in prayer at persons to whom we are not attracted or by whom we are threatened, we are drawn beyond our limited self-concern. We can see them against the background of their relationship with God. We can join with God in willing for them good things. Such intercession in the spirit of Christ has the power of creative transformation.

God receives and uses the good wishes for others that we offer in prayer, both in responding to us and in responding to those for whom we pray. God hears us when we bring the needs of others in our prayers.

What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven, and the reality in heaven passes back into the world. By reason of this reciprocal relation, the love in the world passes into the love in heaven, and floods back again into the world.¹⁹

¹⁹Ibid., p. 351.

Most of what has been said so far has assumed the simplest case of intercession, one person praying for another. But intercession for people in groups, organizations, institutions, problem situations are all appropriate objects for our intercession. The liturgical prayers of the church have traditionally included prayers for the sick, the poor, the troubled, the lonely, victims of war, and other categories of people in special circumstances of need.

Such intercession involves positive thinking. Intercessory prayers that consist of thinking about all of the problems and pains and negative dimensions of a situation contribute nothing positive to either God or the world. Careful attention to what the other is experiencing, empathy with the other's pain is an important part of preparation for intercession. Intercession itself involves sharing in the loving will of God. Visualization of our best wishes is one way to do this. Another way is to express hopes and wishes in words.

As we pray for the poor, we may find that God is leading us to envision and hope for an economic order in which all human beings will have access to the necessities of life. As we pray for victims of war, we may find ourselves led to envision peace and human community where justice is guaranteed for all. Prayers of intercession lead us to the petition "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." And this prayer, of course, may be answered as we discover

that we can make a contribution to alleviating some of the suffering about which we have shared our concern with God.

If we are willing to be led by the Spirit into interceding not only for those for whom we have natural concern, but to share in God's concern for all of the suffering of the world, our prayers will more nearly reflect the spirit of the Lord's prayer. Such praying leads to a sixth way we can pray--the prayer of dedication.

DEDICATION

A prayer of dedication says to God, "we give this to be used for your purposes." A gesture of surrender of the personal ownership is implied. Often such prayers begin by expressing awareness that everything is already God's.

We give thee but thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be:
All that we have is thine alone
A trust, O Lord, from thee.²⁰

A prayer of dedication is a normal part of our corporate worship. We make a dedication of our lives with the offerings at the altar. This is in the tradition of King David. (I Chronicles 29:10-19) Special services of worship mark the dedication of new churches, schools and homes. Solomon set the pattern with a lengthy prayer of dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. (I Kings 8:27-61) Other prayers are

²⁰William W. How (1823-1897), "We Give Thee But Thine Own" in The Book of Hymns, #181, stanza 1.

expressions of personal dedication of self. One of the most poignant of these is a prayer written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer while he was a prisoner of the Nazis in Germany.

Who am I? They often tell me
 I stepped from my cell's confinement
 Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
 Like a squire from his country-house.
 Who am I? They often tell me
 I used to speak to my warders
 Freely and friendly and clearly,
 As though it were mine to command.
 Who am I? They also tell me
 I bore the days of misfortune
 Equably, smilingly, proudly,
 Like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
 Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
 Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
 Struggling for breath, as though hands were
 compressing my throat,
 Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
 Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
 Tossing in expectation of great events,
 Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
 Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
 Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
 Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?
 Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
 And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
 Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
 Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
 Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!²¹

CONTEMPLATION

A seventh way in which we can pray is known as

²¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Prisoner for God (New York: Macmillan, 1954) p. 165.

contemplation. Thomas Merton, a contemplative monk, defined contemplative prayer as "a way of resting in (God) . . . it is a wordless and total surrender of the heart in silence."²²

No method or system leads one into contemplative prayer. Sheer silence is not the same thing. As in a human relationship, the quiet, joyful resting in the presence of a loved one comes as a gift only after the work of getting acquainted and establishing ties of intimacy has been done. The contemplative prayer of monks is "embedded in a life of psalmody, liturgical celebration and the meditative reading of Scripture."²³ Such quiet resting is dependent on more active communion in an ongoing pattern.

In contemplative prayer there is a quiet communion of the self with God. Merton speaks of "silent and receptive attention to the inner working of the Holy Spirit."²⁴ The unity of all things in God transcends the personal sense of self. Words and thoughts are no longer necessary, as one simply rests in God.

Mystical experiences of cosmic unity are fairly common for people who do not practice contemplative prayer. And it is possible for even one who is just beginning to pray to sit quietly in the presence of God. But those who feel called to the serious practice of contemplative prayer are

²²Merton, pp. 29-30.

²³Ibid., p. 28.

²⁴Ibid., p. 42.

encouraged to find a spiritual director, someone who has experience and who can be trusted to provide guidance along the way.

One of the profound insights provided by contemplative prayer is an intuitive awareness of the presence of God in all things. From the practice of such prayer in silence, it is possible to return to the kitchen, the classroom, the office and be aware of God in the glasses we wipe, the children we discipline, the job assigned to us, the people we meet. No longer is the world a lifeless machine. It is revealed as an on-going process alive with the presence of God.

From the Eastern Orthodox branch of the Christian church has come a one-sentence prayer called the Jesus prayer which is used as a kind of mantra in contemplative prayer. The long form is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." A short form, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me", is also frequently used. Sometimes the prayer is condensed into just the name "Jesus".

This prayer has been used in the eastern church since at least the sixth century. A collection of writings about the experience of people with the prayer is a part of the devotional tradition of that church. Only since the middle of the twentieth century has the prayer become popular in western Christendom.

One reason for its popularity is that it capsulizes

in just a few words the heart of Christian prayer. This means that it is ideal for busy people on the go. There is no need to settle down and get quiet. It can be prayed in the midst of activity. It can even be prayed in the heart in the middle of a conversation as a way of practicing the presence of God.

The phrases of the prayer are often related to the rhythm of breathing. As a mantra, it can serve to center the self in the presence of God.

With or without a mantra, the thrust of Christian contemplative prayer is the constant awareness of the abiding presence of God.

Day by day,
Dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly,
Love thee more dearly,
Follow thee more nearly,
Day by day. ²⁵

CONCLUSION

Material for this session has provided a brief, introductory overview of the major forms that Christian prayer has taken across the centuries. A public worship service may include all of the forms described, or just a

²⁵Richard of Chichester (1197-1253), "Day by Day" in The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1940) #429.

few. They may be in the order in which they are presented here, or in some other order.

In personal devotion, the same is true. Prayer one day may be an overflowing of thanksgiving, another day fervent petition, and still another, quiet contemplation. Or a single prayer may include all of the forms. There is no set order in which one must pray. A natural flow is present in the order as presented here. But a period of meditative reading of scripture may lead one directly to intercessory prayer for some person or situation. While interceding one may be reminded of a neglected opportunity to do something for the person or about the situation, which may lead to confession. The confession may lead to commitment to doing something to make amends. Or some other order may suggest itself. However, familiarity with the forms that prayer has taken in our tradition can enable us to progress in our prayers as the Spirit leads us.

A discussion of the question "How can we pray?" needs to include some words of warning.

1. Prayer takes time. Like any relationship, if our openness in communion with God is to develop to any significant level we will need to participate regularly in corporate worship, set aside regular time for individual prayer, and, if possible, schedule time at regular intervals to take a day or two alone to spend some extended periods of time in meditation and prayer. Those who do this report that the

benefits of such retreats convince them to make it a regular pattern.

2. There will be dry and frustrating times in prayer. All of the saints of the church who write about prayer report periods of discouragement and "dryness" in prayer. If this happens to you, don't give up. Sharing your pilgrimage in prayer with someone else or a group may help to sustain you through such times.

3. None of us ever becomes an "expert" in prayer. Even Thomas Merton, whose life was dedicated to prayer, wrote near the end of his life:

We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all of our life!²⁶

²⁶Merton, p. 37.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. With which of the seven ways we can pray do you have the most experience? Rank them in order of their familiarity to you--#1 being most experience, and #7 least experience.

(Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, dedication, contemplation)

(1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

(6)

(7)

Put a star after the ones you are willing to include in your private prayers this coming week.

2. Which of the ways we can pray is the most difficult for you? Why is it difficult?

3. Which is the easiest? Why is it easy?

4. Do you agree with the statement: "Every part of reality is related to every other part of reality in the universe"? Does your position on this issue affect the way you pray and think about prayer?

5. Have you observed any examples of prayer being used as modern magic? How was that different from prayer as petition?

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS FOR WEEK FOUR

I. PREPARATION AND CENTERING

II. MEDITATIVE READING OF THE SCRIPTURE

Day One: I Cor 13:1-13

Day Two: Acts 2: 25, 26, 28

Day Three: John 15:1-11

Day Four: Isaiah 55:1-11

Day Five: Colossians 1:9-14

Day Six: Ephesians 2:19-22

Day Seven: Romans 11:33-36

III. PRAYERS

Adoration: My soul proclaims the greatness of God,
and my spirit exults in God, my savior . . .

Confession: I need to grow as a Christian in these
ways . . .

Thanksgiving: I feel like celebrating today because . . .

Petition: I need your help in solving this problem
 . . .
 or making this decision . . .
 or knowing what to do about this . . .

Intercession: I am having a hard time with some
 people and situations. Can you help
 me share in your love and concern for
 them? They are . . .

Dedication: Whoever I am, you know, O God, I am yours!

IV. SILENCE

SESSION FIVE: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES PRAYER MAKE?

The television camera focused on Mother Theresa of Calcutta. Seated in a private jet, she was writing a letter. The narrator described how she handles the business of her world-wide religious order of a hundred thousand members with hand-written correspondence delivered by regular mail. She was hitching a ride out to look at some of her work in another Indian city. A bemused male voice from another part of the plane asked, "Where do you get all of your energy, Mother?" She lifted her head. Her tranquil, wrinkled face was framed by her blue and white habit. "That's why we go to the mass--communion," she said. "We start the day with Him and we end the day with Him." Members of her order work with the lepers, the indigent dying, the orphans, the poor of India. Those who live in the mother house in Calcutta are expected to be back from their day's work in time to be present at the evening worship. "We're not social workers, you know," she explains. Christian worship makes the difference.

PRAYER AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Prayer is one of the means of grace--one of the ways in which God's healing, saving, whole-making work is done in the world. Prayer is given to us as a gift from God. When we appropriate this gift for ourselves, it can make a difference in us.

Martin Heidigger, the existentialist philosopher, has described two modes of being-in-the-world.

One is the inauthentic mode in which one's projects are set for one by others--by social expectations or past conditioning or the hope of reward. The second is the authentic mode in which one chooses one's own projects.¹

What has been said about prayer in this study suggests a third mode of being--where one chooses to create one's own life in dialogue with God.

Social pressures push and pull us in all sorts of directions. We are motivated to keep up with the Joneses, be accepted by the "in-group", be loved by desirable people. What we do can be powerfully influenced by what the Joneses, the "in-group", desirable people do, or by what we are told they expect. Much of commercial advertising hooks into our sensitivity to social expectations.

Past conditioning can set unrealistic limits on us, establish us in destructive behavior patterns, and predispose us to make faulty assumptions.

The reward system of our society can entice us into doing things that violate both ourselves and our environment.

Other-directedness is to some degree desirable and unavoidable. Living cooperatively with other people involves negotiating our projects with the needs and expectations of others. Social expectations, conditioning and reward systems

¹Cobb and Griffin, p. 81.

make possible social existence. But life lived simply in unexamined response to the pressures exerted on us is not our only possibility. We do have the freedom to direct our lives from within. We can choose how to respond to all of the varieties of influences in our lives. We can establish our own value system and act out of it. We can choose how much power to give to the various forces at work on us.

One of the influences on our lives is the presence and call of God. God is with us, exerting an influence on us whether we choose to pay attention or not. When we choose to respond to God's offer of open communication, we choose to give power or weight to that relationship. We make an intentional move to give attention to the ideal possibilities that God offers to us. Without relinquishing our free will, we can freely choose to be Christian disciples. We can choose to live authentically in dialogue with God.

Such open communion with God can creatively transform our lives.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul talks about three qualities of Christian life, or fruits of the spirit: faith and hope and love. (I Cor 13:13) When we pray, we open the way for the Spirit to nurture in us all three of these qualities--faith, hope and love.

In a human friendship, communication and interaction is necessary if the relationship is to survive and grow. I need to know you in order to trust you. The only way we can

get acquainted is by trusting each other enough to reveal ourselves. So the process goes step by step. A little trust makes possible the first steps of friendship. This initial acquaintance makes possible more trust, which makes possible deeper friendship. So it is with prayer and faith. Faith expressed in prayer opens the way for the Spirit to nurture new faith, which in turn makes possible new adventures in prayer.

Thomas Merton points to this interdependence between prayer and faith in his advice to a group of monks at a California monastery.

Start where you are and deepen what you already have and you realize that you are already there. Everything has already been given to us in Christ. The trouble is that we don't know what we have. All we need is to experience what we already possess. The problem is that we don't slow down and take time to know it.²

The Spirit also has an opportunity to nurture hope in us when we pray. Charles Wesley sang:

Jesus, my strength, my hope,
On thee I cast my care,
With humble confidence look up,
And know thou hearest my prayer.
Give me on thee to wait,
Till I can all things do,
On thee almighty to create,
Almighty to renew.³

²Lecture by Michael Terry at La Casa de Maria, January 28, 1981.

³Charles Wesley (1707-1788), "Jesus, My Strength, My Hope" in The Book of Hymns, #253, stanza 1.

In a discussion of worship, Henry Nelson Wieman was reminded of a street car that operated in Los Angeles in the early part of this century. At one point along its route it climbed a hill.

. . . the hill is so steep that the car cannot use a trolley. It is lifted by a steel cable which runs endlessly beneath the car and between the rails. But the car does not move until it connects with the cable in the proper manner. The car stands still until its passengers are in, then a certain clamping mechanism closes down upon the cable and the car is lifted to the top of the hill.⁴

Worship, he says, is the way we clamp down on the cable. When we pray we discover that we are not alone. We are in God and God is in us. We do not have to climb our hills in our own strength alone. We can tap into God's resources for our life. The resources of prayer are a source of hope.

In his sermon at Pentecost, Peter quotes from the Psalms referring to the hope given by an awareness of God's presence.

I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will dwell in hope . . .
Thou hast made known to me the ways of life;
thou wilt make me full of gladness with thy presence.
(Acts 2:25, 26, 28, quoting Psalm 16:8-11)

A person who approaches life hopefully is more likely to be open to the new possibilities offered by God than is a

⁴Henry Nelson Wieman, Wrestle of Religion with Truth (New York: Macmillan, 1928) pp. 70-71.

person who is burdened down by discouragement, locked in the grip of fear, inhibited by doubts. Communion with the "almighty to create, almighty to renew" is a channel for the sustenance of hope, a source of strength and energy, a medium through which the Spirit can be preparing us to receive possibilities that we might not otherwise even perceive.

Fosdick illustrates the hope-inducing power of prayer with the story of Jem Nicholls, a "typical result of Quintin Hogg's work for boys in London."⁵

When Jem was asked, after Mr. Hogg's death, how the fight for character was coming on, he said, "I have a bit of trouble in keeping straight, but I thank God all is well. You see, I carry a photo of 'Q.H.' with me always, and whenever I am tempted, I take it out and his look is a wonderful help, and by the grace of God I am able to overcome all."⁶

In prayer we discover that we have more than the resources with which our past has equipped us for the facing of the hills we have to climb.

When we pray, we give the Holy Spirit a chance to nurture in us love. Three kinds of love are involved: (1) a healthy kind of self esteem, or respect and appreciation for the unique persons we have been created to be; (2) a corresponding esteem for our human brothers and sisters combined with a willingness to care for them; and (3) a deepening love for and commitment to God.

⁵Fosdick, p. 109.

⁶Ibid.

Church members occasionally object to the inclusion of a prayer of confession in the order of worship for the congregation. "It makes people feel bad," they say. "Confessing our offenses and our negligence stirs up guilt feelings and contributes to low self-esteem. People come to church to feel better, not to feel worse."

Christian confession, however, is a means of grace. When we confess who we really are to the One who already knows who we are and who loves us as we really are, we have a chance at self-esteem grounded in personal integrity. God's acceptance and forgiveness does not say that all that we have done and left undone is all right. It says that we can pick up from here and move on. Freed from the burden of guilt we can live with our real, sinful selves, accepting ourselves because God accepts us, and esteeming ourselves because if God prizes us how can we do otherwise?

Marjorie Suchocki points to the unique contribution that Christian confession makes to the development of healthy self-esteem.

There is . . . a source of identity for us beyond ourselves. That is, our identities do not depend solely upon our retention of the threads we have woven; if we let go of one self-image, it is not the case that we will succumb to the chaos of fragmentation and fear . . . We can dare to let it go, knowing there is a ground to the self we receive in its stead. The new self-image, constructed in openness to all of the past, will be congruent with reality. Therefore, the energies previously utilized in denial of reality will now be

released for ways of transformation.⁷

The forgiveness is offered. The prayer of confession opens the way for that forgiveness to be operative in our lives. Confession makes an important contribution to the development of healthy self-love.

Prayers of intercession make a contribution to the development of our love for others. Our ability to love other people grows with practice. We learn to love by giving love. In our prayers of intercession, we are expressing our care and concern for other people to God who also loves and is concerned for them. If I pray for you, the Holy Spirit has an opportunity to be at work in me increasing my love and concern for you. My prayer may be answered with a fresh insight about what I can do to contribute to your well-being. As I express my love for you, my love can grow. Prayers for people for whom we have little concern may give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to nurture love and concern for them in us. Prayers for our enemies give the Holy Spirit a chance to show us ways to deal constructively with the conflict or enmity between us. Acting on such insights opens the way for improved relationships and moves us in the direction of love.

At the least, prayers of intercession stretch us beyond self-centeredness and widen the horizons of our

⁷Marjorie Suchocki, "Prayer on a Process Model" Paper presented at the meeting of the American Academy of Religion meeting in 1979.

concern. As we open ourselves to God's love for other people some of that compassion may rub off on us. Mother Theresa, for example, says that she sees Christ dying in the gutter in Calcutta. When we give God a chance, we may find ourselves sent out as agents of divine love. Norman Pittenger describes this process:

. . . the Love that is God awakens, stimulates and strengthens the capacity for loving that is God's very image in (humanity).⁸

When we pray, we give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to increase in us love for God. When we take time for adoration, praise and thanksgiving, we open ourselves up to more profound comprehension of who God is and what God does. An expanded and clarified vision of God has enhanced power to evoke from us devotion. As we grow in prayer, our increased experience with God can lead to a deeper love for God. This, at least, is the witness of the saints of the church.

Other words besides faith and hope and love have been used to describe the word of the Holy Spirit in the one who communicates openly with God. Trust, confidence, power, strength, patience, peace, tranquility of soul, personal integration, an attitude of gratitude, even "recharged batteries" are identified as by-products of prayer.

⁸Norman Pittenger, Praying Today (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) p. 29.

PRAYER AS A MEANS OF INCARNATION

And there is abundant testimony that through the life of prayer the Spirit of Christ can come into a human life. As William James once said, "We become like what we attend to."⁹

When we open ourselves in prayer, we respond to the invitation worded in Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me."

In the words of John Cobb:

Christ is most fully present in human beings when they are most fully open to that presence.¹⁰

Paul speaks about the Spirit dwelling in us:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you. (Romans 8:11)

Sometimes it is Christ who dwells in us.

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col 1:27)

Sometimes he speaks of growing up into Christ, or putting on Christ. (Gal 3:27) The gospel writer John speaks of Christ as the vine, his human disciples as the branches.

⁹Norman Pittenger, God's Way With Men (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969) p. 152.

¹⁰Cobb and Griffin, p. 99.

In multiple ways the message is communicated that God can live in and through us. As we practice repeatedly being open to God, the divine likeness can grow in us. Our desires can be purified, a new value system can evolve, we can become new people.

Bishop Sjogren says:

When (Christ) lives in my heart, then he also shines through; when praise of him is singing in my heart, then it also rings through, often without my knowing. It is not my personality but his that becomes luminous.¹¹

All that has been said to this point about the difference that prayer can make to an individual can be said also about the church. As the church opens to God in prayer, it gives the Holy Spirit an opportunity to nurture its faith, its hope, its love, and to make it the Body of Christ in the world.

But the experience of praying together has the additional power to bind a community of believers to each other. The shared relationship to God in worship provides the basis of unity for a shared mission in the world as God's people. The mission of the Church has its roots in the worship of God in the church. From the prayers of the congregation comes the power and direction for the work of the church in service in the world.

¹¹Per-Olaf Sjogren, The Jesus Prayer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) p. 87.

PRAYER MAKES A DIFFERENCE TO THE WORLD

Prayer makes a difference beyond the Christian and the Church. It makes a difference to the world. The individual Christian in whom the Holy Spirit is at work makes a difference. Sjogren explains how:

So it is a good thing that there are people in whose heart Christ dwells. Even one person who has in his heart not a den of thieves but a temple where Christ dwells is an immeasurable blessing for any home, or group, or community. That person carries a lighted candle, the beams of which shine on all whom he meets, on all with whom he has to do. It is not he who shines on the others about him, it is Christ shining in and through him.¹²

Beyond this, the prayer itself affects the world. Our prayers make a positive contribution to the totality of reality. There is considerable evidence that in the interconnectedness of all reality, our prayers for others and for the world make a difference to those for whom we pray.

PRAYER MAKES A DIFFERENCE TO GOD

And our prayers make a difference to God.

When we pray, we make a way for God's grace to be active in our lives. We provide an opportunity for God's saving, healing, whole-making work in us. As we offer ourselves as God's instruments in the world, God can work not only in us but through us.

¹²Ibid.

Our petitions and intercessions influence God's activity. We do not change God's vision of the ideal possibilities for the creation. But we can affect what God does in a particular concrete situation. God hears all of our prayers and takes them all into account. Our prayers are answered. Many are answered just as we ask them. Others are not. To some of the petitions the answer may be "No". Other petitions need to be matured and purified in the dialogue of prayer before they can be answered in the context of God's active benevolence toward the whole creation. How God answers prayer is sometimes beyond our thoughts, and God's ways are not our ways. (Isa 55:8-9) But there is an unending parade of witnesses to answered prayer. In response to prayer, circumstances change; problems untangle; tensions ease; a clear conviction emerges about an alternative accompanied by the kind of peace and joy that only God can give; a new idea or perspective lights up the mind; fresh courage, calm, comfort or hope emerges; a nudge to do something is felt; a new desire appears; a temptation diminishes or is conquered; a soul is strengthened; a door opens. God acts in response to what we ask.

And beyond this, some people make so bold as to suggest that God is enriched by our sharing in prayer,¹³ that as we express adoration and thanksgiving, and share ourselves

¹³Pittenger, God's Way With Men, p. 153.

in confession, petition, intercession and dedication, as we rest in God's presence in contemplation, we even contribute to God's pleasure!¹⁴

Is it any wonder that Christians have understood prayer to be a part of God's will for our lives?

¹⁴Lewis S. Ford, "Our Prayers as God's Passions" in Cargas and Lee, p. 436.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. What needs to be added to this statement about the difference prayer makes?
2. Does anything not ring true with your experience? Is there anything with which you disagree?
3. Has prayer ever been for you the clamping down on a cable that could carry you up a hill? What about prayer do you think caused Dr. Wieman to think of that image?
4. How are the members of Mother Theresa's order different from social workers?

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS FOR WEEK FIVE

- I. PREPARATION AND CENTERING
- II. MEDITATIVE READING OF THE SCRIPTURE

Perhaps you can begin now a more long-range program of reading the scripture. Two popular patterns merit your consideration.

1. Follow a standard lectionary. Lectionaries suggest four readings from the Bible for each week, one each from the Old Testament, the Psalms, a Gospel and one of the New Testament letters or Epistles. These four readings can be used for meditation all through the week. Over the period of the three year cycle of the lectionary, most of the major themes of scripture will be covered. The passages will relate to the seasons of the church year--Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, etc. Many ministers preach from the lectionary. If your pastor does so, this might be a way to link your personal devotional reading to the corporate worship of your congregation. Ask your pastor for help in locating a copy of a lectionary, if this pattern appeals to you.
2. Choose one or two books from the Bible and read one or two chapters from each during the week. For example, you might begin with the Psalms and

the Gospel according to John. Read the first Psalm and the first chapter of John several times during the week. Each time you may have a fresh experience with the passage. This system gives you a chance to reflect and let a passage speak to you in greater depth. This approach also gives you time to do more background study on the books you choose to read. Using a study Bible or a commentary, or several translations of the Bible, or all of these resources, you can find out what scholars have learned about the material you are reading. This may stimulate you to hear more than you might otherwise hear. Beware, however, of getting sidetracked into doing nothing but objective Bible study. Let the Spirit speak to you through the scriptures.

If you are going to continue to work with a prayer partner or group, you might agree to read the same passages and share your insights when you meet to share in prayer.

III. PRAYERS

If you want a starting place, create your own sentences to complete.

Adoration:

Confession:

Thanksgiving:

Petition:

Intercession:

Dedication:

IV. SILENCE

Part III

A REFLECTIVE POSTSCRIPT

HEILER'S TYPOLOGY

"In the personal piety of great religious spirits," says Friedrich Heiler, "Two main types stand forth with distinct prominence."¹ In his monumental study of the history and psychology of prayer in the major world religions, Heiler defines these two main types of personal piety as mysticism and prophetic religion. Drawing on an impressive fund of information, he paints a broad picture of both types or styles, setting them off in clear contrast to each other.

Portions of his characterizations can be charted in parallel lists of opposites.² Read down the list to get the feel for each style, and across to experience the contrast.

MYSTICISM	PROPHETIC RELIGION
Personality denying	Personality affirming
Life denying	Uncontrollable will to live
Passive	Active
Quietist	Challenging
Resigned	Desiring
Contemplative	Ethical

¹Friedrich Heiler, Prayer (London: Oxford University Press, 1932) p. 135.

²Cited from *ibid.*

Love and union are central concepts	Faith is key concept
Feminine	Masculine
Ignores history	Values history
Goal is flight from the world	Goal is transformation of the world
Monastic	Prophetic
Expressed in contemplation	Expressed in preaching the Gospel
Tolerant	Evangelistic
Individualistic	Social

When Heiler makes a theological comparison, he identifies two sub-categories of mysticism: speculative mysticism (mysticism of the absolute) where God is non-personal, and personal mysticism (mysticism of personal theism) where God is personal. Most Christian mysticism is of this personal type. The God of prophetic religion is also personal, but is much more active, energetic and involved in history than is the God of personal mysticism. The God of prophetic religion is known for acts rather than attributes.

Prayer is quite different in the two styles of personal piety. In mysticism, Heiler says, prayer is a matter of practicing the presence of God. Attention is focussed on God, with no concern for changing or influencing God in the interests of our own wishes.³ Except in the heretical quietist branch, Christian mystical prayers contain praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and surrender.

³Ibid., p. 200.

Petition is only for the salvation of the soul, not for earthly goods. The foundation for mystical prayer is the petition, "Thy will be done".

Prophetic prayer majors in petition and intercession. Jacob's wrestling with God is the prototype. "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (Gen 32:26) "Crises, temptations and needs"⁴ give rise to spontaneous and improvised prayers that move from complaint or question to petition, to persuasion, to expression of weakness and dependence. The point is to move God to answer with what the pray-er wants.

Jesus is cited as one who prayed in the prophetic style, but he added a new dimension. He concluded his prayer with resignation to the will of God. In the prayers of the Reformers, great models of prophetic prayer, resignation was not quite as complete as in the prayers of Jesus.

. . . there is no suppression of the desires, but confidence, assurance that God, even if He denies us our unimportant wishes, still knows what is best for us.⁵

Ocasionaly in prophetic prayer, good fortune inspires praise or thanksgiving. But the attention here is on the gift rather than the Giver. The focus of prophetic prayer is human needs and desires.

Heiler admits that there are few "pure" examples of either of his categories. "The devotional life of by far the

⁴Ibid., p. 229.

⁵Ibid., p. 269.

larger number of religious geniuses represents in varying degrees a mixture of the mystical and prophetic."⁶ He points to Augustine and Francis as outstanding examples of those who bridged the two styles.⁷

Heiler's work was completed during the first World War. But it continues to be helpful in making sense of the varieties of forms and theologies of prayer extant more than fifty years later. Books on prayer that tend strongly in both the mystical and the prophetic directions are available on the shelves of bookstores today. Literature from eastern schools of meditation and from western contemplative communities reflect the mystical mode. From the evangelical community comes material in the prophetic tradition. Each side tends to value its form of religious experience over the other, sometimes even to the point of calling into question the validity of the other.

CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES

Bloesch: Prophetic Prayer.

For example, Donald Bloesch, in a recent evangelical statement, speaks unequivocally from the perspective of prophetic religion. He contrasts his understanding of prayer with that of some of the great Christian mystics. Prayer for

⁶Ibid., p. 227.

⁷Ibid., p. 170.

Bloesch is petition.

. . . the essence of true prayer is heartfelt supplication, bringing before God one's innermost needs and requests, in the confident expectation that God will hear and answer.⁸

He contends that meditation and contemplative adoration are not prayer. But he allows that meditation can function helpfully in the devotional life as "aid", or "preparation" or "supplement" to prayer.⁹

Prayer for Bloesch is a matter of openness with God.

Bloesch sets up a sharp dichotomy between "true, biblical" prayer and mystical prayer. Knowledge of God, he says, is revealed exclusively through the historical witness culminating in Jesus Christ and recorded in scripture. There can be no direct perception of the presence of God or communion with God without mediation through Christ. In evangelical prayer, our thoughts should be directed not to God, but to the Word made flesh.¹⁰

In Bloesch's evangelical theology, God is transcendent, independent from the creation, and there is infinite distance between the one who prays and God. He views this distance as bridged because God comes to us. We don't climb a ladder to God. God is seen as active and powerful, not passive or responsive. Prayer is characterized as active

⁸Donald Bloesch, The Struggle of Prayer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) p. 67.

⁹Ibid., p. 20 and 119.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 120.

pleading, wrestling, struggling with this active God, not passive surrender to God's will. True prayer, again, employs rational thought forms expressed in words.

Bloesch comes close to being a pure example of the prophetic form as described by Heiler. But he acknowledges that evangelical prayer at its best is not completely free of all elements of mystical influence or experience. But prayer as importunate petition is "true" and "biblical". Religious experience with a mystical dimension is considered to be an incursion from outside the historical revelation, definitely suspect and of secondary value to the life of faith.

Merton: Mystical Prayer.

Speaking from another shelf of the bookstore is Thomas Merton and a whole school of his followers. They view the more mystical experiences of prayer as the peak or climax of the religious life. Contemplative prayer, as they describe it, is rooted in meditative reading of scripture and in liturgical prayer. But verbal communication with God is preliminary to and preparatory for the silent, open communion with God that goes beyond words.

Merton reveals a value judgment in his report of a classic, monastic belief.

Secret and contemplative prayer should be inspired by

liturgical prayer and should be the normal crown of that prayer.¹¹

Silence is preferable to words. He approvingly quotes a Syrian monk, Isaac of Niniveh:

More than all things love silence: it brings you a fruit that tongue cannot describe.¹²

Contemplative prayer is seen as an end in itself. The rest of life is simplified to the bare essentials and solitude is sought in the interest of enhancing the life of prayer.

Prayer for Merton is openness to God.

PROCESS THEOLOGY OF PRAYER: A BOTH/AND ALTERNATIVE

In contrast to these "either/or" approaches to prayer, a process theology of prayer is able to affirm "both/and" without the necessity of giving one mode priority over the other. A process theology of prayer can offer the possibility of a remarkable degree of balance between these two elements or emphases in religious experience. Prayer defined as two-way communication, both openness to God and openness with God, minimizes the differences and maximizes the possibilities of the prayer experience. One can use an androgynous approach to the life of prayer, rather than having to choose between a masculine or a feminine style. Prayer can be the journey

¹¹Thomas Merton, Contemplative Prayer (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) p. 47.

¹²Ibid., p. 30.

inward that is an integral part of the journey outward.

In a process theology of prayer, mystical and prophetic forms of prayer can co-exist with a minimum of tension. John Magee, writing on prayer in the late 1950's under the strong influence of Whiteheadian philosophy, very simply melded together the two approaches to prayer in what he calls "the spectrum of prayer." What so often appears to be a dichotomy is transformed into a polarity. As in a human relationship, there can be many forms and styles of interaction, from the quiet resting in God's presence to the vigorous expression of need and request for God's help. Prayer does not need to be either all struggle or all rest. Prayer can begin with openness to God in meditation and adoration, move to openness with God in confession, thanksgiving, petition and intercession, and return once more to openness to God as contemplation as naturally as a conversation moves back and forth between listening and speaking.

Communication can be both verbal and non-verbal. Since God relates to us in the sanctuary of the soul, the issue of whether we go up to God, or God comes down to us is irrelevant. We can both know the presence of God directly and receive God's revelation in Christ. Prayer from a process perspective is both an end in itself (the kingdom in embryo) and a means to an end (a means of grace).

Because there is scriptural record of both mystical and prophetic prayers, such a theology of prayer comes

closer to reflecting the pluralism of both the theology and the practice of prayer in the canon.

In process ways of thinking about reality, it is quite easy and natural to understand prayer as openness to God. If the becoming occasion is always in communication with God whether this communication is conscious or not, prayer can be understood as simply choosing to be consciously receptive to God's aims.

Henry Nelson Wieman, the earliest of the process theologians to deal specifically with prayer, interpreted prayer in a way that reveals this natural affinity between process thought and the mystical tradition as defined by Heiler. Prayer for Wieman was a process of becoming open, responsive, submissive and conformable to the aims of God.

Worship has three stages. The first is that of exposure. One gives himself a time exposure to God. . . . The second stage of worship is diagnosis. We must find out where our habitual adjustments are inadequate for realizing those possibilities which the environment has in store for human living. . . . The third stage of worship is reconstruction.¹³

There was no place for petition or intercession. The purpose was to expedite the adjustment of one's self to the aims of God.

Later process theologians, however, seem to take for granted that both styles of prayer are appropriate expressions of a process theology.

¹³Henry Nelson Wieman, Wrestle of Religion with Truth (New York: Macmillan, 1928) pp. 71-72.

John Cobb's definition of prayer as "the whole stance of openness to God and responsiveness to the divine call"¹⁴ reflects the central place of the relationship between the becoming occasion and the primordial nature of God. But he includes in his discussion of prayer a description of intercessory prayer as "the most generous, and perhaps the most Christian, aspect of prayer."¹⁵ And he sees praise, thanksgiving and confession as flowing naturally from the experience of openness to God's aims.¹⁶ Prayer in all of its Christian forms fits with his process theology.

Norman Pittenger is very close to Cobb in his theology of prayer. The emphasis is on the "alignment of self--in desires and action--with the divine Love."¹⁷ Receptivity and responsiveness are the central themes. But he too sees a place for intercessory prayer, holding before God those whom we think are in need of God's help. He coins two phrases to describe the two modes of prayer already identified by Heiler: active passivity (Heiler's mystical

¹⁴John Cobb, "Spiritual Discernment in a Whiteheadian Perspective" in Harry James Cargas and Bernard Lee (eds.) Religious Experience and Process Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1976) p. 363.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 364.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 365.

¹⁷Norman Pittenger, Praying Today (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) p. 95.

prayer) and passive activity (Heiler's prophetic prayer qualified by "Thy will be done.") Pittenger reflects a leaning toward the mystical when he says, "The highest activity may mean active passivity."¹⁸ But he is clear that both styles of prayer have a place in his theology of prayer.

Carolyn Stahl suggests two other words to describe the two modes of prayer: receptive and directive.¹⁹ Directive prayer she defines as "self-initiated concern and care for oneself and for others."²⁰ Both have a place in her process theology of prayer.

Robert Cooper is the only writer who explicitly relates the two modes of prayer to the two natures of God, mystical to the primordial nature of God and prophetic to the consequent nature of God.

Prayer on the one hand may be purely contemplative, and may be said to correspond to God's primordial nature in his envisagement of the realm of eternal objects. Prayer may, on the other hand, be seen to have as it were a 'consequent nature', viz., that of the involvement of the actual occasion in which it is ingredient in the process of the world. This is a philosophy in which prayer actually does change things.²¹

¹⁸Norman Pittenger, God's Way With Men (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969) p. 161.

¹⁹Carolyn Stahl, "Prayer and Process Thought", an unpublished paper.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Robert M. Cooper, "God as Poet and Persons at Prayer" in Cargas and Lee, p. 422.

Perhaps Cooper gives a clue to the reason why there seems to be the natural leaning of process theologians toward the more mystical end of the pole. There are many more unanswered questions about the consequent nature of God in process thought than there are about the primordial nature of God. Nevertheless, both natures are a part of the picture, and both forms of prayer have their place.

And process theologians continue the work of explaining how prophetic, directive, consequent prayer "works". Cooper sees such prayers as lures for feeling.

The person who prays, not unlike the poet, may have a vision of the world. . . . The range of this vision is not as wide as God's nor is it as profound. It is, however, possible for the person who prays to contemplate possibilities for himself and for other entities, and to the extent to which he is able to do so, he is potentially able to alter some situations.²²

Stahl theorizes about the effectiveness of directive prayer in her paper.

It is clear that the directive element of prayer affects both the conerescing occasion and the future. What one chooses to pray about greatly alters or determines what is perceived to be the relevant future, that is, it makes that which is prayed about more relevant than it would have been without the directivity. Intensity is increased with conscious direction.²³

Gordon Jackson pursues the relationship of process thought and intercessory prayer. He says that process understanding of the soul as a society of dominant occasions

²²Ibid.

²³Stahl.

"contributes the structure of experience explicating the possibility of intercessory prayer."²⁴

The soul, he says, in both Hebrew and process understandings is an appetitive, volitional organism. It is not simply a passive recipient of what God offers. All souls are "socially intertwined" in God's everlasting nature. As we assert our wills in prayer for each other, we make a difference in what God can and does do.

Using his prayers for his invalid mother as an example, he makes the following interpretation:

Translated into intercessory prayer this would mean that my mother, 2500 miles away, stroke-ridden, with only fragments of durations of awareness, is prehended by God. I, praying a simple prayer that she might be at peace, am prehended by God. Isolating these two prehensions within the total experience of God, there my mother and I meet. God brings those two prehensions into Harmony within the vast divine redemptive work. In turn, God floods back upon my Mother an aim--for Peace?--appropriate to her condition as well as upon me appropriate to my needs (anxiety over her state of illness?) God does not need to be reminded to care for my Mother nor how to care for her. God's graciousness is to experience us as we actually are, and then to use those experiences in luring us into transforming moments. Perhaps God uses intercessory prayers to enrich our love for one another and to insist that we bear responsibility for one another. Each intercessory prayer is an actuality that God must and does take into account in persuading the world from moment to moment. Perhaps such prayer opens up for God the opportunity to persuade by a radical new possibility. Perhaps the divine patience and humility are God's waiting upon such actualities as intercessory prayer to let them be a creative part of the divine aiming. . . .

²⁴Gordon E. Jackson, "Recovery of Soul and Intercessory Prayer" A paper presented at the meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 1979.

The process understanding of Soul when coupled with process insight into the relation of God with the world allows the three Souls--my mother's, God's and mine--to be mutually prehended. Perhaps language or perhaps sheer intercessory feeling can reach from one soul to the other through the gracious agency of God, and so have effect, that is, make a difference, in each. God offers the divine life as meeting-place, uses the emotion of intercession to relate appropriately to the world, and lends out the divine Soul to lift our human souls into new reaches of existence.²⁵

Process thought is not able to lift the veil of mystery from the experience of prayer. It remains a mysterious linking, an incomprehensible wonder, a miracle of miracles.

But by providing a theological framework open to both God and the world, and to communication between the two, process theology can make significant contribution to contemporary Christian spirituality.

²⁵Ibid.

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